ロスト・ユニバース③

凶夢 ざわめく

神坂 一

イラスト 義仲翔子

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Lost Universe 3: The Whispering of Evil Dreams

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PROLOGUE

The universe spread across the monitor held nothing but a tedious silence.

"...peaceful, isn't it..."

Milly sighed, taking a sip of the cinnamon tea that filled her white teacup.

By standard time it was around three in the afternoon—a drowsy midday teatime, one might say. She was the only one relaxing in the living room of the Swordbreaker, drifting through some nameless region of space. Meanwhile, Kane was in the training room putting himself through an intense workout, same as every day.

—That day—

Ever since the pirate incident on Planet Regn in the Winaran system, where he had fought—and lost—to a man believed to be an assassin from the criminal syndicate Nightmare, Kane had been training every single day. His stated reason: "I can't stand the idea of anyone being better with a blade than me!" Milly thought his motivation was just a little on the unhinged side, but figured that as long as it made him stronger, that was probably fine.

"...If only we had some work and a steady paycheck on top of all this, I'd have nothing to complain about..."

She murmured and sighed again.

—Right.

In the previous incident, the shuttle docked to the Swordbreaker's hull had been destroyed, and they'd bought a replacement—but that had immediately drained their operating funds dry. They'd picked up a couple of small jobs on the planet where they purchased the shuttle, but it was nowhere near enough to warm their pockets. The reason they were now drifting through this nameless stretch of space was simply that they couldn't afford to keep paying moorage fees at a satellite port.

"...Somehow it feels like we're getting poorer and poorer, faster and faster..."

Milly smiled with self-deprecating irony and raised her cup to her lips—

"Kane! Milly! Please come to the cockpit immediately!"

It was at that moment that Canal's voice echoed from a speaker somewhere in the room.

"...? What is it...?"

Carrying her cup and saucer, her golden spoon clinking softly, Milly made her way to the cockpit. When she stepped through the door, a single woman stood in the center of the room. Dressed in robes reminiscent of a shrine maiden from a fantasy game, the figure appeared nearly real—but was actually a holographic projection.

Canal Vorfeed. She was what one might call the consciousness of this ship—the Swordbreaker—though her personality was, to put it kindly, rather twisted.

"Is Kane not here yet?"

As Milly settled into the gunner's seat, Canal glanced at her and said: "Not yet—and Milly! Why did you bring drinks in here again?!"

"Don't worry, don't worry. I won't spill. Promise ♡"

"You say that, but you've spilled black tea nine times and coffee twice so far!?"

"Then this one makes it ten for black tea ♡"

"Please don't talk like you're planning to spill! My precious control panels are quite delicate! I absolutely refuse to have a situation where we can't use the anti-air systems because of black tea stains!"

Just as the two of them were carrying on like this—

"—What's wrong, Canal?"

The third member of their crew stepped through the door: none other than Kane Blue River. Back when Milly used to describe him to her old work partners, she'd called him "a nice guy in a suspicious cape who's obsessed with bladed weapons"—and that description fit him to a tee, which really was something.

Canal turned toward Kane and said: "Listen, Kane—Milly brought tea into the cockpit again!"

"...Was that... really all you needed to tell us...?"

"—Ah. No. That's not it—anyway, please sit down over there. Not on the control panel!"

"Yeah, yeah."

Waiting for Kane to settle into the pilot's seat, Canal began to speak.

"—Actually, just now I was hacking into the computer databank of the Patent Office as a hobby..."

"W-wait a minute—!?"

Milly nearly fell out of her seat.

"—What is it? So suddenly."

"...I mean... you just casually said you were hacking... that's a legitimate crime, isn't it!?"

"Hmph. You're still thinking too shallowly, Milly."

Canal wagged her right index finger. Tsk, tsk, tsk. Of course, there was no technical reason a holographic projection needed to wag its finger—but for some reason, Canal had a peculiar habit of fussing over small gestures and expressions far more than necessary.

"As long as you're not bothering anyone else, isn't it fine?"

—I'm pretty sure the people at the information security company are enormously bothered by this, Milly thought to herself. She didn't say it out loud because she'd judged there was simply no one in the room who would respond with guilt or any change in behavior.

Taking Milly's silence as agreement, Canal continued:

"—To go on with what I was saying—among the data, I found information on a newly patented targeting system for spacecraft gun emplacements, registered just a few days ago."

"...Don't tell me you're about to ask us to buy it...?"

"No, that's not it. The thing is, this targeting system partially uses Lost Ship technology."

"—What!?"

Both Kane and Milly cried out simultaneously at Canal's casually delivered words.

—Lost Ships—

Long before humanity had mastered faster-than-light travel and expanded into the galaxy, a civilization had bloomed within the Milky Way—and then perished. The relics of that civilization were known as Lost Ships. For various reasons, their existence was officially unacknowledged, treated only as rumor, yet their fundamental capabilities far exceeded anything modern technology could produce. The Swordbreaker and Canal were themselves one such Lost Ship.

"...Is it really Lost Ship technology? Couldn't it just be a case of independently arriving at a similar system...?"

Kane's question was met with a meaningful glance from Canal.

"...Even if the company that filed the patent was Laglude Corporation?"

"Who?! What company is that!?"

Crash!

Both Canal and Milly nearly fell over at Kane's words.

"You know them! They were working with the pirates in the incident at Winaran! The company in league with the pirates!"

Milly said, picking herself up from the control panel.

"...That company!? I see...! So the company that was working with pirates who had a Lost Ship just announced new technology based on Lost Ship specs... However you look at it, this is clearly—"

—Right.

Laglude Corporation had told the pirates who brought in Lost Ship components that the parts were "impossible to analyze"—while secretly conducting their own research, planning to monopolize whatever technology they managed to decode.

"But hold on. Sure, they might have stolen Lost Ship technology, but that doesn't mean they're actually breaking any laws, does it?"

"...W-well... there's no law against researching or using Lost Ship technology, so technically they're not guilty of anything... but it's just irritating, isn't it."

"Look, we can't pick a fight with everyone who irritates us—we'd end up at war with the entire galaxy! The real question is whether that company is just trying to make money, or if they have some other scheme going on. If it's purely about profit, we can leave them alone."

"...Hmm... I still don't like it... Canal, what do you think?"

Kane turned—and found Canal standing motionless, a sorrowful expression on her face.

"...Canal?"

Kane frowned. Canal kept that sad look and slowly raised her right index finger.

"...Ten times..."

The pale finger pointed to a teacup that had tipped over on the control panel, its contents pooling across the surface.

A silver disc drifting in space against the backdrop of a brilliantly blue planet—

Floating in orbit around Planet Regn in the Winaran system, it was a satellite port owned by Laglude Corporation, known as the Valharie. Countless spacecraft gathered at this port, and people and cargo passed through it to descend to the planet's surface by shuttle.

"—Hm...?"

At the control tower of the Valharie, a radar operator murmured and tilted his head slightly. "...Hey, something's off with the radar. It keeps flickering on and off, like it keeps forgetting what it's doing."

He said this to a nearby communications operator and tapped the radar display in front of him with his fingertip—konk, konk. The radar had been showing a single approaching spacecraft for a while now, but every so often, inexplicable noise ran across the entire screen.

"How should I know?!" the other operator replied without turning around, utterly indifferent. "Tell the mechanic about it later... Still, I envy radar operators. All you do is sit and stare all day."

"...Hey... just because you lost badly to me at poker yesterday doesn't mean you have to..."

"Shut up. I let you win yesterday. Anyway—hold on, incoming transmission."

He switched on the communications system, exchanged a few words with the caller—and furrowed his brow slightly. After completing the routine docking clearance procedures and cutting the transmission, he turned to the radar operator:

"—Hey."

"What? Still sore about losing?"

"That's not it—you said a ship was approaching, right?"

"Yeah. Assuming the radar isn't totally busted."

"...That transmission just now was a docking request from that ship..."

"Huh. So the radar's not broken then."

"...Well, the thing is... the caller said something strange: 'What's this huge crowd following behind me?'..."

"A huge crowd behind it!?"

The radar operator echoed the words and looked back at his display. It still showed only one ship.

"—Weren't they just messing with you?"

"Maybe, but you were just complaining that the radar was acting up. So I thought, just in case..."

He grumbled for a moment, then switched on the external visual display monitor—something he'd never had reason to turn on before. He aimed the camera toward the approaching ship and zoomed in. Shortly after, a single blue cargo freighter appeared in the center of the screen.

"...That's the one showing up on radar..."

He muttered as his fingers flew across the keyboard, running a motion-detection scan on the visual feed. A few seconds passed—then the Valharie's image analysis computer placed a red cursor box slightly to the upper right of the cargo ship.

"—Bingo! Something IS there after all!"

"Couldn't it be a meteor shower?"

"Hold on, let me zoom in on the actual visual—"

It wasn't necessary.

From within the red cursor box, dozens—then hundreds—of white lights bloomed toward the screen.

"— — —!?"

Before either of them could even register what they were seeing—

BOOOM!

A torrent of long-range beam cannon fire shook the Valharie to its core!

VEEEE! VEEEE!

Red warning lights flashed furiously, and a deafening alarm filled the control tower.

"What's happening!? What's going on!?"

Before the assembled operators could even grasp the situation—a second volley obliterated the Valharie's control tower entirely.

The space around Planet Regn had become a battlefield—no, a slaughterhouse.

A fleet of dozens of vessels had materialized, slipping completely through the radar net, and opened fire—some targeting Regn's satellite ports, others aiming at the planet's surface. The Universal Guardians fleet stationed in the area sortied to intercept, but was decimated almost entirely without even a chance to negotiate. The Universal Guardians had no choice but to request deployment of the Universal Force.

"—What in blazes is going on!?"

Commander Brian Clyde paced restlessly around the bridge of the Grey Condor, muttering irritably.

Universal Force, F-112 Strike Cruiser Squadron. The fleet—consisting of the flagship, a small mobile carrier called the Grey Condor, along with cruisers and destroyers for a total of ten ships—was heading straight for Planet Regn. The fleet had completed its phase drive jump and was already charging into the Winaran sector at maximum acceleration, though arriving at the scene would still take a little more time.

According to the top brass, Regn was under attack by an unidentified fleet—

"...An attack by a mystery fleet, in this day and age!? This isn't the Age of Galactic Exploration! Who in the universe would pull a stunt like this!? —Navigator! How long until we reach Regn!?"

"Sir! At this pace, approximately twenty minutes!"

"Commander Clyde!"

One of the communications officers called out: "Transmission from Universal Guardians at Regn! The fleet has ceased bombardment and begun retreat! Due to lack of patrol ships capable of pursuit, they are abandoning the chase!"

"...They sensed us coming!? Which direction are they retreating!?"

Of course, Clyde had no intention of letting them escape. He'd run them down, beat them, and extract from any survivors exactly who had the nerve to pull something like this.

"...Well, about that..."

In response to Clyde's question, the communications officer hesitated a moment, then said: "According to the Universal Guardians, based on their calculated trajectory... they're heading straight toward us!"

"What!?"

A murmur rippled through the bridge. The enemy they'd assumed was fleeing was, of all things, heading directly toward them—directly toward the Universal Force fleet.

"They're challenging us!? The Universal Force!? —Any long-range radar contact!?"

"Negative!"

"All ships: battle stations! We will likely make contact with the fleet that attacked Regn in approximately ten minutes!"

A flurry of activity and tension swept through the bridge. Inter-ship communications switched to laser relay, and the fleet spread into a cross-shaped formation with ships fanning out in all directions.

"—Any radar contact!?"

The second time Clyde asked, about five minutes had passed.

"—No... still no contact."

The answer that came back was an uncertain "no."

"—Strange... if the enemy is heading this way, they should have appeared on radar by now..."

At this point, Clyde had not yet been told that the fleet had gone completely undetected by the radar systems of every facility on Regn. The Universal Guardians had reported it—"the fleet didn't appear on radar"—but the military brass had dismissed it as an excuse for negligence. Given the capabilities of military and police radar, it was safe to say that no technology capable of evading it existed in the present day.

"Just to be safe, run an energy signature check!"

"Understood! Running energy signature check!—Still no readings!"

"...Hmm..."

Clyde tilted his head and thought for a moment, then said: "...Perhaps what appeared to be heading toward us was a feint, and they changed course before entering radar range... —Communications: contact Regn's Universal Guardians and ask whether the enemy fleet's heading has changed!"

He gave the order and shifted his gaze to the main display. The display—which covered the entire upper front of the bridge—showed only the jet-black expanse of space. Visible near the center as a lone blue dot was Planet Regn.

—Suddenly, Regn vanished from the display.

"What!?"

He nearly shouted aloud, then looked again—and the blue dot was still there, right in the middle of the screen. Must have imagined it— That was his first thought. And then a star near Regn flickered.

—?

"Commander!"

A communications officer's voice cut through Clyde's silence. "Upon contacting the local Universal Guardians—they say the fleet does not appear on their radar either, and they are unable to respond to questions about any change in heading!"

"It's not showing on radar!? Impossible!? But... Is there any energy signature nearby!? Run it again!"

It was hard to believe anything could evade radar—but even if that were true, as long as their engines were running, there had to be some kind of energy signature. And yet—

"Still no energy readings!"

"...Then... they really did flee..."

Clyde was mid-thought when he froze, staring at the main display. Stars were visibly twinkling on the screen. If the monitors were malfunctioning, it would affect the entire display. Which meant there was only one reason for stars to twinkle in the vacuum of space.

Something was there, blocking their light.

"Front view—run motion detection on the main display feed! There's something out there!"

The bridge crew's eyes snapped to the main display. The twinkling stars began to resolve into small, dark shapes that grew slowly, like a spreading stain, increasing in size with every moment.

"—What... is that...?"

Someone murmured softly.

"Still no radar contact, no energy readings!"

The radar operator's voice was close to a scream.

"—Could it be!? Are they running on inertia!?"

Clyde finally pieced it together. Fire the engines once to build speed, then cut them and coast on momentum—no engine output meant no energy signature. But even so, the intercept time seemed slightly sooner than inertia alone could account for—

The dark shapes grew rapidly, now clearly visible as the silhouettes of warships.

"—They're closing fast! All ships decelerate, prepare to fire! Prepare to launch fighters! Communications, broadcast to the enemy fleet on all frequencies: 'Heave to and identify yourself and your intentions. Failure to comply will be treated as a hostile act.' They won't listen, but do it anyway. Target speed!?"

"—Calculation complete! Target speed is—"

The navigator looked at the navigation display and went silent.

"—What!?"

"...Well... since radar is unavailable... we calculated the target's movement speed from visual data..."

"Skip the method! What's the result!?"

The navigator hesitated a moment, then answered: "...Approximately one-point-three times our current speed!"

"Impossible!? At that speed on inertia alone!?"

Clyde swung back to the display. Dozens of dark shapes filled the screen, visibly growing larger every second.

"Ugh...! No choice! All ships: fire by optical targeting! But the first volley is a warning—don't hit them!"

"All ships report: fire solutions ready!"

"Alright! All ships, fire first volley—fire!"

The fleet's energy weapons left blazing trails across the black void. But the approaching fleet made no evasive moves—didn't even swerve—and continued calmly forward as if nothing had happened.

Clyde was silent for a moment, then said: "Second volley ready! This time aim to hit! But don't target the engines!"

Before the report of firing solutions ready could come back, however, something changed in the approaching fleet.

"Energy readings detected ahead! Enemy fleet appears to be raising shields!"

"They've reacted!? Course!?"

"No change! Still closing! All ships, fire solutions ready!"

"Fire!!"

Once again the deadly energy beams slashed through the dark, and this time several unmistakably struck their targets.

But—

"No effect! Targets show no sign of damage! All shots appear to have been deflected by their shields!"

"At this range!? Damn it! What kind of shields are those! Prepare rail gun fire!"

"No time! Targets are charging straight at us!"

"What!?"

Sure enough, the enemy ships had raised their shields and were barreling straight toward them without any change in course.

"All ships evasive maneuvers!"

A black hull filled the entire main display.

"Here they come!!"

Someone screamed in terror.

—And then—

The fleet of dozens of black warships slipped casually past the frantically maneuvering Universal Force vessels—right alongside them—and continued on their way without a care in the world.

A long silence fell over the bridge.

"—What... in the universe... were they...?"

Even forgetting to give the order to pursue, Commander Clyde murmured in a hoarse voice.

INVASION

"Laglude Corporation—destroyed?"

When they heard the news from Canal in the Swordbreaker's cockpit, both Kane and Milly furrowed their brows. It had been about a week since they'd learned that Laglude Corporation had filed a patent application incorporating Lost Ship technology.

"...You mean they went bankrupt?"

"No. I mean destroyed," Canal replied firmly, shaking her head at Milly's question.

"—This just happened today, just now. It'll be on the interstellar news broadcast shortly, but... An unidentified fleet of dozens of ships launched a surprise attack on Planet Regn. They smashed the Universal Guardians patrol stationed there and struck both the satellite ports and the planet's surface."

"...That's pretty bold. Could've brought the Universal Force down on them."

"It did."

"Ah. Right."

"The fleet made contact with the military once, but apparently shook off the pursuit and escaped without trouble. When the damage at Regn was assessed, every single target—whether satellite port or ground installation—turned out to be a Laglude Corporation facility. The company headquarters, factories, and research facilities on the surface were all destroyed without exception—and they even went out of their way to level the executives' private residences."

"...So they came all that way just to wipe the company out?"

Kane asked, frowning.

"That's what it amounts to."

"...But why?"

This time it was Milly. As usual she'd brought cocoa into the cockpit today, but perhaps judging it pointless to say anything, Canal let it go without comment.

"...As for the motive behind the attack on Laglude Corporation, there are several key points. First, the Universal Force made contact but was unable to capture or destroy a single enemy vessel. Second, according to both the Universal Guardians and the Universal Force personnel present on-scene, the fleet in question left no trace whatsoever on police or military radar."

"—Is that really true?"

Canal nodded with complete confidence in response to Milly's question. "—Absolutely. This information comes from extensive wiretapping of military and police communications and repeated hacking of their computers."

"...Oh... I see..."

—I probably shouldn't have asked, Milly thought, taking a sip of her cocoa.

Canal continued. "In other words, the fleet in question possessed capabilities that were considerably—no, by current scientific standards, outstandingly superior. An exceptionally capable fleet. A company—Laglude—that had just announced technology partially derived from Lost Ships. Don't you think the answer is becoming fairly clear?"

"Not really."

"Me neither ♪"

Both Kane and Milly answered without a second thought, and Canal's face twitched.

"...I-in other words... you can at least imagine that Lost Ships are somehow involved, can't you!? Both of you!?"

"...Well... we can manage that much, yeah."

"—Which is to say. One day, someone somewhere, through some combination of chance and inevitability, noticed the same thing I did—that the patent Laglude filed was an application of Lost Ship technology. The fact that they noticed that means whoever it was must also have had some kind of connection to Lost Ships."

"...Hey..."

Finally beginning to sense something unpleasant coming, Kane straightened up from where he'd been leaning in his seat.

"—That person disliked the idea of Lost Ship technology becoming public knowledge, and so assembled a powerful fleet and sent it to attack Laglude—that would be the most plausible motive, wouldn't it."

"...Hold on... are you saying... that this 'someone' is none other than Nightmare?"

"I can't say for certain..."

Canal shook her head slowly.

"It's true that 'they' despise the existence of other Lost Ships beyond their own... but—"

"They? You mean the ones we fought before—Nezard, Galveira... the Lost Ships?"

"Yes. But putting together everything about this incident, it's highly likely the attacking fleet also incorporated Lost Ship technology. If it were 'them,' they would never mass-produce something like that—so I think it's more likely that some entirely different party acquired a Lost Ship quite some time ago."

"...Somehow... listening to you, Canal, it sounds less like Albert Van Stargazer is controlling Nightmare, and more like those Lost Ships are the ones doing the controlling..."

Canal looked directly at Milly, who had spoken up.

"—What if that's exactly right?"

Milly was speechless.

"...Still, when Lost Ships keep popping up everywhere you look, it's hard to believe the rest of the world still treats them as nothing more than rumor..."

"But even in twentieth-century Earth, local fishermen were quietly catching coelacanths all the time while academics refused to acknowledge the creature's existence at all."

"...What kind of analogy is that...?"

"It means people, once they've convinced themselves something doesn't exist, aren't straightforward enough to simply change their minds again. —But what do you make of this incident?"

"...What do I make of it... I mean, it doesn't seem like it directly involves us, but... somehow..."

"—Somehow?"

"...I just have this feeling... that we're going to get dragged into it eventually... very strongly..."

And with that, Kane let out a deeply gloomy sigh.

...oooohhh...

Was it his imagination, or was the sound echoing through the darkened room growing louder by the day? Trying not to notice the cold sweat beading on his forehead, the man in the dark suit looked down at the report in his hands.

"—Regarding the matter of identifying those responsible for the attack on Laglude Corporation, which you requested some time ago—I believe we have a lead, and I have come to report."

Whether the old man listening to him—Albert Van Stargazer—was paying attention or not, he remained with eyes closed, standing in silence without a word.

The man continued his report regardless.

"According to information from one of our agents, it appears the attack was carried out by Wilkins Corporation—or rather, the organization known as Wisp."

Wisp—one of the criminal organizations in the galaxy that had been rapidly accumulating power in recent times. They couldn't match Nightmare, certainly, but they were undoubtedly among the top ten in scale throughout the galaxy.

It was a common enough story: a criminal syndicate using a legitimate corporation as a front. Wisp and Wilkins Corporation had exactly that kind of relationship.

Nightmare had never engaged in direct conflict with Wisp before, but that didn't mean they could afford to ignore them. Agents—spies, to put it plainly—had been embedded in both the organization and Wilkins Corporation, and it was one of those agents who had brought in this intelligence.

"There is an experimental industrial plant owned by Wilkins Corporation in the satellite orbit of Macfield, the fifth planet of the Karua system in Galactic Area 2-2-B. According to our information, the facility houses hundreds of new-model vessels not yet announced to the public. Recently, thirty of those vessels departed, and returned several days later. The timing of this departure and return corresponds closely to the attack on Laglude Corporation. Checking the navigation logs would have confirmed this definitively, but security was too tight to allow that level of investigation. There are, of course, many other companies that conducted spacecraft test flights during that period—but given the number of vessels involved and the fact that their departure and return were kept secret even from regular staff, this seems the most likely suspect by far. As for what to do next—we could have the agents take greater risks and dig deeper, or we could continue as before and proceed cautiously—"

"Continue as before," Stargazer said quietly, his eyes still closed.

"—Understood. I will arrange accordingly. Any further instructions regarding this matter?"

"No."

"—Then I will report on other matters at the usual time this evening."

Taking the old man's silence as affirmation, the man in the dark suit bowed and left the room.

What remained was Stargazer, standing alone in the darkness.

...What... are you thinking...?

A voice eventually came, trembling as if the darkness itself were speaking, from somewhere and nowhere at once.

The true master of this room—and in a sense, of Nightmare itself—

"What am I thinking—about what?" Stargazer replied, slowly opening his eyes.

*...If the reason for the attack lies in monopolizing Lost Ship technology... then this group called Wisp may already possess a fleet modeled after Lost Ships...
...Troublesome, and unpleasant... ...Make things clear... and if they have a Lost Ship in their hands... destroy them...*

"That was already—my intention."

Stargazer said the words in a quiet, measured tone.

"—Kane, there's a transmission for you from someone calling herself Tania Sticky of the Universal Guardians."

Canal's notification reached Kane while he was in the training room, slicing through virtual targets with a cheerful grin.

"—Tania Sticky?"

He turned off the training machine and looked toward Canal's image on the wall display.

"—Never heard that name..."

"No, it's not in my memory either. —Shall I put her through?"

"Yeah. Connect her."

He replied, and a moment later the screen changed to show a woman's face.

She looked to be in her late twenties, perhaps just shy of thirty. Dark brown hair swept up, a dark blue suit, and glasses that made her look just slightly bookish. To put it simply, she looked like a living illustration of "an intelligent, attractive career woman." She'd identified herself as Universal Guardians, but the place she was calling from looked nothing like an office—it had the feel of a home living room.

"—Hi. Kane?"

"Yeah."

Kane nodded, and she was quiet for a moment before saying:

"...You're wearing a cape..."

Her tone was faintly bewildered.

"Yeah. I was in the middle of training."

"...So you don't wear it normally?"

"Not when I'm sleeping or bathing. —And you are?"

"...I don't wear capes either, usually..."

"...No, I wasn't asking about capes..."

"—Tania Sticky. Universal Guardians. ...Rail was right about you, apparently."

"Rail?"

Kane echoed the name.

Rail Freimer—a young Universal Guardians inspector he'd crossed paths with during a number of incidents. Kane had no way of knowing, of course, that Rail secretly had ties to Nightmare.

"Yes. He always says: Kane has strange hobbies, He’s skilled in a fight—but absolutely cannot be tailed."

"Ha ha ha ha ha."

—Next time I see him, I'm punching him— Kane thought to himself, forcing out a dry laugh.

"—So I'd like to ask you to take on a rather troublesome job."

"...A troublesome job...?"

Kane made no effort to hide his distaste.

"That... depends on what it is. I can't say I've ever walked away feeling good from any incident Rail's been connected to."

"Actually, I want you to do an internal investigation of a certain company."

"A company?"

"Yes."

"If it's tax evasion or fraud, that's for the tax office or an accountant. Business conduct is for industrial espionage specialists, and employee behavior is HR's job."

"What about illegal weapons manufacturing and sales?"

"..."

Kane understood.

Fair enough—that probably wasn't something tax auditors or accountants were well-suited for.

"To be honest, we don't have any evidence yet. If we did, we'd have already sent in undercover agents. What I want from you is concrete proof that this company is manufacturing and selling weapons illegally. How about it?"

"—Hold on."

Kane put on an openly suspicious expression.

"Easy enough to say—but if they're manufacturing and selling weapons, then by definition there are buyers. Which means organized crime is involved, right?"

"Oh, you figured that out already."

She admitted it without missing a beat.

"Not a great deal, then. And if you haven't sent in undercover agents yet, that means the budget isn't there either. So the pay will be accordingly modest. Organized crime involved, low pay. Normally, I'd never take a job like this."

"True. Normally."

She said it meaningfully, and leaned toward the screen.

"—Two thousand up front, five thousand more on success. How about that?"

"—What!?"

Kane was momentarily speechless at the figure she named.

Depending on conditions, the going rate for cargo transport or escort work was usually between one and fifteen hundred including expenses. Two thousand up front, seven thousand total—that was frankly outrageous.

"...W-wait a minute!? Where's that kind of money coming from!? There's no way the Universal Guardians are that generous!?"

"I am Universal Guardians, yes, but I never said the Universal Guardians were the client. —Actually, I'm doing this as a side job—acting as a broker without the knowledge of the UG. The real sponsor is someone else, and I can't disclose their name. If I did, my cut would disappear too."

"...But given that kind of money, this has to be an illegal job however you look at it."

"...Well, an investigation would require breaking and entering at a minimum—but compared to illegal weapons manufacturing and ties to organized crime, that's pretty minor. The high price is, frankly, hazard pay. After all, organized crime is involved."

"...Hmm..."

Kane fell silent for a moment. However you looked at it, this was about as suspicious a proposition as they came. Suspicious—but the pay was enticing.

Eventually he gave a small nod.

"—Alright. I'll take the job."

"You took it!? A job that suspicious!? One that could literally get us killed!?"

After Kane had explained everything to Milly back in the Swordbreaker's cockpit, she scolded him with an openly disapproving look.

"...I mean... well..."

Kane scratched his head sheepishly.

"'I mean well' nothing. The client's name can't be disclosed, the pay is outrageous—and first of all, whether this Tania person even works for the Universal Guardians is questionable."

"...Actually... I thought the same thing..."

"You thought the same thing... so then why did you...!?"

"Honestly, I was planning to take the advance and skip out."

"...What?"

Milly frowned at his words.

"I figured—there's no Tania Sticky in the Universal Guardians. And even if there is, whoever came to me with this job is probably someone else using the name. So I set a condition: 'If any part of your story turns out to be false, I have the right to unilaterally cancel the contract.' After the advance was wired, I'd prove that the person who came to me wasn't the real Tania Sticky of the Universal Guardians. That way the two thousand is mine to keep. If they complain, I just say 'you're not Tania,' and it's done. And since they obviously have dirty hands, they can't exactly take me to court about it."

"...I see..."

"Except—here's the thing. When I had Canal check, it turns out there really is a Tania Sticky in the Universal Guardians, and she's definitely the same person who contacted me..."

"...Really?"

Milly looked at Canal, who nodded.

"I took a discreet look at Tania Sticky's file in the Universal Guardians' computer. Seven years on the force, specializing in organized crime investigations. I matched the photo on file against the caller's face—it's the same person."

"And the advance has already been wired," Kane added gloomily.

"...Which means..."

Milly murmured, and he nodded.

"—Right. I have no choice but to do the job."

"..."

"I-it's not all bad news though!"

Under Milly's wordless stare, Kane scrambled to make the best of it.

"Think about it—we at least have two thousand in hand, and that's an undeniable fact. Two thousand! Milly, what was your paycheck last month?"

"...Zero..."

"Exactly! Two thousand is enough to cover back pay! And if the job succeeds and another five thousand comes in, I can even pay bonuses!"

Looking at Kane's desperate pitch, Milly let out a small sigh.

"...Fine, fine. I get it. —Alright, Kane, I never asked—where are we going and what company are we investigating?"

"—Right. Wilkins Corporation in the Karua system."

"Wilkins Corporation!?"

Milly's voice jumped involuntarily.

"...Then Wisp is involved, isn't it!?"

Kane and Canal looked at each other involuntarily at her words.

"...M-Milly...? How do you know about that...?"

"How? Well..."

She hesitated for a moment.

"...Isn't it common knowledge? That sort of thing."

"Which companies are connected to which organizations? I don't think most people know that."

"W-well... you know, I used to work at a detective agency! So information like that just kind of... finds its way in from everywhere."

"Oh, right."

"...Indeed, it was so out of character for you that I'd completely and utterly forgotten."

...Even Canal forgot about me... what does that make me...

Milly stood in momentary indignation.

"...So Milly, you know a lot about Wilkins Corporation?"

"Ah. Not a huge amount... just that they mainly deal in spacecraft-related goods, and that about ten years ago they were taken over by Wisp, so now they're basically the organization's front company. That's about it. Well, if Wisp is involved, seven thousand is actually a pretty fair price. —But what kind of weapons are they making? Illegal ones?"

"Actual warships. Spacecraft battleships."

At Kane's answer, Milly's eyes went wide.

"...That's... quite a large-scale operation they're running..."

"According to Tania, they have a rough idea of where the secret construction is taking place. Wilkins' main office is on the third planet of the Karua system, but they have space factories on the second, fourth, and fifth planets as well. The one on the fifth planet—an experimental facility called Kelvin—is apparently the site in question. We need to get inside, find definitive proof, and send it back to Tania. Once we do that, the job's done."

"Couldn't Canal just hack Wilkins' computer and pull the data that way?"

"I already tried," Canal replied coolly at Milly's suggestion.

"But it seems the computers storing sensitive data are completely isolated from the outside, so hacking was impossible. Even I can't do anything if there's no line to connect through."

"...Meaning there's really no choice but for us to sneak in ourselves..."

Milly let out a gloomy sigh as she spoke.

Floating in the black void of space was a massive earth-colored planet—

The gas giant Macfield was the largest planet in the Karua system by both diameter and mass, and it was the fifth planet in its arrangement. And orbiting it was a silver, somewhat irregular sphere—its longest dimension nearly a hundred kilometers. This was Wilkins Corporation's experimental space factory, Kelvin.

Originally, a rock mass of roughly fifty kilometers had been hollowed out and repurposed, but after repeated modifications and expansions, today nearly all of it had been replaced with artificial construction. Three other Wilkins space factories orbited the same planet Macfield, but Kelvin was the largest of them all.

Drifting slowly toward that Kelvin was a single spacecraft. Needless to say, it was the Swordbreaker, carrying Kane and the others.

"—Alright, let's get this going... Canal, don't show your face. Milly, look more sluggish."

After giving the two of them their acting directions in the cockpit, Kane switched on the communicator and opened a channel to Kelvin.

"—This is Trouble Contractor Kane Blue River, aboard the Swordbreaker. Emergency situation. Experimental facility Kelvin, please respond."

After Kane called out several times, a response came from Kelvin. With a labored expression fixed on his face, Kane addressed the controller on the main display.

"—There's been an accident... The auto-repair system is running, so it'll fix itself eventually, but I ran the numbers and the life support system will finish repairing before the air runs out—actually the other way around. —I need permission to dock and an air resupply—"

The controller looked uncomfortable at Kane's words. The navigation laws did indeed designate rescue of those in distress—those broadcasting an SOS—as the highest priority. But from their perspective, they obviously didn't want an unknown party inside Kelvin.

"—Look, please. I'm not asking for free repairs or a tour of your facility. I just need to dock for a short while until it's fixed and get some air. Of course I'll compensate you properly for it. If you want, we don't even have to step out of our ship while we're docked. Please! I'm already having trouble breathing!"

"...Wait a moment."

Perhaps deciding he couldn't flatly refuse them, the controller rose from his seat and disappeared from the screen for a while—almost certainly going to consult with a superior.

Some time passed.

Eventually the controller reappeared on screen.

"—Understood. We'll verify your registration and permit docking. Proceed to Gate 15. We'll guide you with lights and a beacon."

"Thank you. —But our navigation control systems are also malfunctioning, so we'll need to fly manual. Just the lights for guidance."

"...You're really in rough shape... are you sure you can manage manually?"

"We'll make it work. Thanks, and please."

Kane switched off the display. On the dully gleaming surface of Kelvin, points of light stretched out ahead like a trail of beacons.

"—My, it sounds like you had quite an ordeal."

Greeting Kane and Milly as they stepped off the Swordbreaker was a young man in a suit. He looked to be around twenty-five or twenty-six, with gray hair, a slightly lean build, and sharp, refined features. From how everyone around him behaved, he clearly held a position of considerable authority.

Kelvin, for its part, apparently hadn't been able to bring themselves to tell Kane and Milly to stay on the ship after all, and guided the two of them to a rest room near the dock where the Swordbreaker had landed.

"I'm Gish Howard. I serve as head of security for Kelvin."

Offered a handshake, Kane extended his right hand.

"Thank you. You've saved us."

"—I should tell you up front that Kelvin is a research facility owned by our company—"

"Yes, I'm aware. —We won't go wandering around where we shouldn't. Don't worry."

Gish smiled at Milly's quick assurance.

"Thank you for understanding. —But what kind of accident was it, exactly?"

"Oh, our stupid computer went haywire."

Kane shrugged slightly and said words that would have caused Canal—if she'd heard them—to genuinely consider turning off the life support system.

"It's a mess. The malfunction was in the very core of the core, so the auto-repair system barely worked at all. Between juggling the manual, swapping out burned chips, and going through everything one by one, it ended up like this. Well, you could say it's just poor daily maintenance on our part."

"Are you here on business?"

"Yes. —We're in a line of work where the details aren't something I can share, I'm afraid."

After Gish made a bit of small talk with Kane and Milly, he eventually rose from his seat, saying he had work to attend to.

What was left for Kane and Milly to do—was wait.

* * *

"In the end, those two didn't show any suspicious behavior, after all."

—Seems it was just my imagination—

Gish quietly thought to himself in one of Kelvin's many control rooms. Roughly two hours had passed since the Swordbreaker docked.

The life support system repairs were complete, Kane and Milly announced, and they reboarded the Swordbreaker to depart from Kelvin.

Gish had initially suspected them of industrial espionage and had kept an eye on the two through hidden cameras in the rest room—but they'd done nothing out of the ordinary. They read magazines, sipped coffee, and Kane stepped out once to use the restroom. As a precaution he'd had someone check the restroom afterward, but nothing was amiss there either.

The Swordbreaker itself had been monitored by the dock's cameras throughout, but showed no changes either.

"—This is the Swordbreaker, Kane Blue River. Ready for departure."

Eventually a transmission came from the Swordbreaker. On screen were Kane and Milly in the cockpit.

"This is Gish. —All repaired, are we?"

"—Yes. Life support is fully operational. Navigation systems are still a bit unreliable, but we'll manage—limp along until we drift far enough out for the rest to finish up on its own. Wouldn't want to overstay our welcome. —As for our thanks, a fee for use of the dock..."

"Don't worry about it. We didn't do much. But if you absolutely insist—next time you're in the market for spacecraft equipment, please consider our products."

Gish smiled his best salesman smile.

The dock hatch opened, and on the display the Swordbreaker slowly, unsteadily rose from the dock into the black of space.

Just as the Swordbreaker cleared the hatch—whether from a misjudged thruster adjustment or something else—the hull lurched dramatically to one side.

"—It's going to crash!?"

One of the controllers cried out involuntarily.

But the Swordbreaker fired a counter-thruster at the last possible moment and righted itself.

"—Are you alright?"

In response to Gish's transmission, Kane and Milly reappeared on screen.

"...Sorry for the worry... still seems a bit off, but... we'll manage."

"Well, if you say so..."

The Swordbreaker wobbled but steadily put distance between itself and Kelvin, firing thrusters intermittently. On the control room radar, the ship's silhouette appeared as a small dot.

"Swordbreaker departing."

"Safe travels."

At Gish's words, Kane gave a brief wave through the screen and cut the transmission. And the light on the radar slowly, steadily pulled away from Kelvin.

—At that very moment—

A small pod carrying Kane and Milly was drifting just a few meters above Kelvin's surface.

Needless to say, the Swordbreaker's malfunction had been a fabrication from start to finish. The moment the two reboarded the ship, they'd transferred to a small escape/work pod attached below the shuttle's berth.

The voices and visuals exchanged with Gish during the departure were nothing more than realistic audio and imagery generated by Canal. After launch, Canal had deliberately steered the ship unsteadily, and in the moment the Swordbreaker cleared the hatch, she used the brief blind spot in the dock cameras to eject the pod via compressed air—making no energy signature for sensors to detect.

Kelvin's radar would almost certainly not pick up anything within a few meters—probably a few dozen meters—of its own surface. Otherwise it would register every hull projection and structural piece jutting from the station itself. The plan: enter openly, convince them you're harmless, and in the moment of departure, slip into the radar's blind spot with a small pod and sneak aboard through an airlock.

Kane carefully guided the pod using compressed air. If he allowed too much distance and the radar picked them up, they'd either be identified as debris and shot at or caught as intruders. Either outcome was bad.

"...You doing okay, Kane?"

"Flying-wise, I'm fine," Kane answered Milly's anxious whisper in the dark.

At this moment there was no guarantee no one aboard Kelvin was looking their way. Turn on a light and they'd be spotted immediately. The only illumination inside the pod was the faint glow of the instrument panel.

"Flying's fine—but the problem is whether we find an airlock before the pod's air runs out."

"—Don't scare me like that... Couldn't we get hold of a floor plan for this place?"

"We got one from about five or six years ago... but apparently they've been doing pretty reckless expansions and renovations since then. A floor plan from back then is useless—ah...?"

Kane's eyes fixed on a particular point along the silver horizon.

"—Is that an airlock?"

"Where?... I can't quite tell...?"

"Let's get closer anyway."

Kane maneuvered the pod and slowly headed toward it.

"—Oh! It really is an airlock! You've got sharp eyes, Kane."

"Don't celebrate yet. We have no idea what's where in here. We might find the airlock and get in just fine only to discover we're right next door to the security office."

"...That said, we don't exactly have time to wait around for a better option, do we?"

"True enough."

Kane brought the pod close to the airlock and used the work arm to grab the fixture hook near the hatch.

"—Here we go."

"Okay."

Both of them were already suited up in spacesuits. All that was left was to put on helmets, grab the case with tools and emergency rations, and they were ready. After confirming Milly's thumbs-up, Kane shut down the pod's systems and opened the hatch.

Thunk.

A burst of escaping air pressure sent the pod rocking back for a moment.

Riding the outflow of air, Kane and Milly stepped out of the pod—into the void of open space. Floating, spinning, they drifted and reached the airlock. Milly worked the lever on the outer wall, and through the opened hatch they slipped inside Kelvin.

—The real mission had just begun.

"...Hmm...?"

An indicator light on the control panel caught a technician's eye and made him frown slightly.

Managing the entirety of Kelvin—nearly a hundred kilometers in length—from a single control room was impossible. As a result, Kelvin was divided into numerous sectors, each with its own sector control room, and above those was a master control room overseeing everything.

It was in one of those sector control rooms that it happened.

"—What is it?"

In response to a colleague's question, the technician pointed to the lamp on the panel.

"The airlock at B-06 is activated. —There's no authorization logged for it, right?"

"...I don't think so. —Hang on."

The colleague tapped at the keyboard.

"—Nothing logged. Probably a malfunction or a false trigger... but we can't just ignore it regardless. Guess someone has to go check."

Leaving the room in the care of another colleague, the two set off from the control room. They walked along the main wide corridor, then turned into a narrower service passage. Past the tool storage room, they arrived at the airlock in question.

Opening the first door revealed a small chamber with roughly a dozen spacesuits hanging on either side of the walls. You'd don a suit here, pass through the opposing door into the pressurized chamber, evacuate the air, and then exit through the far hatch into space.

Looking through the acrylic window in the door leading to the pressurized chamber revealed nothing unusual inside. The outer hatch was closed, and a check of the panel beside the door showed no air leaks or other anomalies.

"...Nothing seems wrong, but..."

The technician murmured and tried calling the control room over the wall intercom.

"Arrived at the airlock. Doesn't look like anything's wrong, but..."

"No problem? —But our panel here is still showing airlock activation. You're at the right one, B-06, and not some other airlock?"

"Of course it's B-06. ...You're really still showing activation?"

"Yeah. The activation lamp's been on the whole time."

"From the beginning?... Could be a sensor fault. I'll check it out."

They suited up for safety and opened the inner chamber door. Eventually the one checking the outer hatch spoke up on the helmet radio:

"—Wait, is it this? Look—"

Where the colleague pointed, a small sensor on the hatch had come loose from its mounting because of a slack bolt.

"...A sensor? It's nothing complicated—just a simple cheap thing that breaks contact between sensor and hatch when the hatch moves, triggering the activation signal. Must have worked loose somehow."

The technician said so and let out a breath of relief—without thinking too deeply about what exactly "worked loose somehow" actually meant.

"...This kind of fault I can fix myself. Let's go complain to maintenance about it later."

"Get them to buy us a drink while we're at it... Honestly, causing all this fuss over nothing..."

The two shared a wry smile. And with that, the matter ended without ever reaching the ears of security chief Gish.

While that small incident was playing out at one of the airlocks—the cause of the loose sensor contact—Kane and Milly—were crawling through an air duct of indeterminate location.

Loosening the sensor bolt had, of course, been entirely deliberate.

In a facility floating in space, no one could fail to notice an airlock activating. But ordinary people, upon finding a simple cause like a loose bolt, accept that explanation and stop thinking. They never wonder what, exactly, caused such a simple malfunction to occur.

After rigging the sensor, the two had quickly shed their spacesuits and climbed into a nearby duct—along with their suits and the case full of tools.

A rough plan had been worked out in advance. Find a building map if one was available, or if not, have Milly hack into Kelvin's internal computer to get a rough floor plan. Then identify every dock large enough to store a battleship, and check them one by one.

The problem, of course, was getting around. Kelvin's maximum length was nearly a hundred kilometers—nothing remarkable on a cosmic scale, but far too large for a person to traverse on foot.

There would be high-speed corridors and various other transport options installed throughout, obviously—but whether Kane and the others could use them with any confidence was a separate question entirely.

"...Alright... time for a little break..."

At a wider junction point in the ducts, Kane murmured softly.

"...A break? How can you be so relaxed..."

Milly kept her voice low too. In a duct like this, raising your voice too much would risk it carrying somewhere unintended.

"Charging ahead blindly isn't going to get us anywhere. What we need to figure out is the next move. For now—get out of the duct, get a lay of the land, and move through the regular corridors normally."

"...That's crazy..."

"—Just hear me out. This thing is nearly a hundred kilometers long. Obviously there are employees, research staff, security, maintenance workers—combined, there must be ten or twenty thousand people in here, maybe far more. With a crowd like that, two more people aren't going to stand out. When I met that Gish and his security team, they had name badges—but the employees walking past the rest room didn't, right? Which means once you're inside, you can move around to some extent without ID. There'll obviously be shift changeovers and meal breaks—if we time it right and blend in with those crowds, we shouldn't draw any attention."

"Makes sense... The only people in here who know our faces are the security people and the controllers from before. As long as we don't wander near them, we should be fine."

"Exactly."

"...Although, Kane—if we're going with that plan—at least take off the cape."

Kane's expression shifted slightly into barely concealed displeasure at Milly's request.

A shift-change siren rang out, and Kelvin's corridors filled with people in an instant. Workers heading back to their quarters, others going out to eat, some taking advantage of the chaos to slack off. The linear rail that wound through Kelvin's interior ran non-stop, loading and discharging passengers, and the fast-moving walkways were packed wall-to-wall with people.

Mixed in with the crowd, Kane and Milly moved with the flow.

They were in casual clothes—but then again, so were most of the people around them. If anything, those in business suits were in the minority. For the people who lived and worked here, Kelvin was home as much as workplace. People in business suits during personal time would be the exception, not the rule.

"Still... there are even more people than I expected. I said ten or twenty thousand, but this might actually be in the hundreds of thousands."

Kane murmured, scanning the area with careful sidelong glances.

"...But it's basically a whole town in here, isn't it."

There were convenience stores, boutiques, restaurants, and entertainment venues.

"Hey look, Kane, there are even adult establishments. See, over there."

"—Don't go turning your head around like a tourist! You'll look suspicious! People live here, obviously there are all kinds of shops. —Most of them are probably under Wisp's thumb, though."

The last part came as an even quieter murmur. If they were running illegal shipbuilding inside Kelvin, a significant number of organization members would have to be embedded here in some capacity. Which meant loudly discussing such things was not a good idea.

"Right, it's also a revenue stream for them. —Oh! Kane! Over there?"

"...What is it... now...?"

"I think that's an information terminal. —There should probably be a map of the area inside it."

Where Milly's eyes directed him, nestled against what appeared to be a monument or sculpture in the center of a plaza, were several terminals.

"—Let's go take a look."

The two made their way through the crowd to the terminals in the plaza's center. On the display: the title "Kelvin Information Services," an angel mascot character, and the word "Start."

Milly lightly touched the "Start" portion of the screen, and it switched to show a menu of categories: entertainment, dining, hobbies, sports, and so on.

From the long list, Milly selected "Maps & Transit." After several more similar steps, the screen eventually displayed a rough overview map of Kelvin.

But—

"...This is useless..."

Kane peered over her shoulder and sighed.

The oddly shaped sphere that was Kelvin was dominated almost entirely by "Research & Business Facilities," with "Residential Areas" literally dotted across the structure in roughly twenty locations. They were currently in Residential Area 16.

The sheer density of people here made sense—it was a living area. The business, research, and factory sections probably had far fewer people about.

—But cameras, certainly.

While the residential areas could be explored in considerable detail on the terminal, the research and business sections were shown only in rough-block form with vague labels like "Business Facility 11," with no indication of which part was security, which was research, which was factory.

Even emergency evacuation routes from research areas—which you'd think would be standard—couldn't be found here. Perhaps that kind of information was only available from within the facilities themselves.

"...Then I suppose we're down to the same old approach after all..."

Kane murmured and gave Milly a gloomy little nod.

"...Hacking into some computer somewhere..."

The artificial moon called Kelvin knew no night.

All operations ran in rotating shifts, and every facility ran continuously at full capacity, in practice never resting. Even the shopping streets had two of each type running side by side—one open while the other had its shutters down.

For the people who lived here, night was simply the period between shutting off the lights after returning home to their room or dormitory and waking up again.

That was the headache for Kane and Milly.

On a planet's surface, there was natural day and night, and people moved accordingly—fewer eyes at night, perfect for slipping through the dark unseen. Here in the relentlessly bright Kelvin, that option simply didn't exist.

On top of that, infiltrating individual facilities was another thorny problem. On a planet, you might pose as a vending machine serviceman or equipment salesman to gain entry—but here, everything belonged to a single company called Wilkins Corporation floating alone in space. An unknown insurance salesman or some such suddenly appearing would instantly raise suspicion.

—So in the end—

The two fell back on the most fundamental approach available.

Kelvin might retain some raw rock in places, but the majority of it was artificial construction. Between the walls of each sector ran structural supports, ducts, and energy supply conduits—countless things. Which meant, depending on location, there were gaps large enough for a person to pass through.

Through those gaps, guided only by the beam of handheld lights, Kane and Milly crawled.

After that. Following a quick meal in the area, they'd returned to the duct and proceeded until Kane used his Psy Blade to cut through a section of duct wall and emerged into the labyrinth of structural supports.

—The Psy Blade was a weapon that used the user's mental energy to generate an energy blade. The blade could be projected outward like a beam pistol, but it was less practical than a conventional gun and had never achieved widespread use. Its ability to double as a laser torch, as Kane was using it now, was one reason it had been adopted by Universal Force close-quarters combat units. Kane's reason for carrying one was purely personal preference.

The two were honestly crawling through spaces that even they couldn't confidently identify on a map.

"...But Kane... why did you put the cape back on when we're crawling through a space this cramped...?"

From behind him, Milly's question prompted Kane to keep crawling at the same pace as he replied:

"Nobody can see me here, so a cape won't make me suspicious, right?"

"...No, suspicious or not isn't the point..."

"I get antsy without my cape."

"...Oh... alright then..."

"—Milly, isn't this it?"

Kane stopped and let Milly take the lead.

"—Let me look..."

She crawled forward, and there in the circle of lamplight before her: a connector, a bundle of cables attached to it.

"...Bingo," she said.

It was a computer cable terminal, running in all directions through the walls and ceiling of Kelvin. Strip the connected cables here, jury-rig them to the handheld computer she'd brought, and hack her way into the system.

Milly got straight to work. A utility knife scraped away the cable sheathing and exposed the copper wire beneath. With Kane's flashlight illuminating everything, she completed the connection to the handheld computer and moved into the hacking process.

White fingers flew across the keyboard, murmuring occasionally, pausing to wait, tapping again. From the outside, Kane had absolutely no idea what she was doing or how.

Then suddenly, Milly stopped moving entirely and froze.

"...What is it?"

She was silent for a moment before answering his question.

"...The hack succeeded... I'm pulling the facility map data over now..."

"Huh. Not bad at all."

"...But..."

"But?"

Milly was silent a moment longer, and then suddenly broke into a cheerful smile.

"...I think they may have noticed I'm hacking them ♡ Oops ♡"

"'Oops' is not going to cut it!!!!!"

Kane's involuntary scream echoed between the structural beams.

KELVIN

"Being hacked!?"

Gish's voice rang out in Security Room One, located near the center of Kelvin, as the report came in from a subordinate. His mind flashed briefly to the catch-all spacecraft called Swordbreaker that had stopped by here a few hours ago.

Were those people involved—or was this entirely unrelated to them, someone already embedded in Kelvin who had simply chosen this moment to make their move?

Either way, it couldn't be ignored.

"Can we cut the line?"

Gish demanded, facing the display showing his subordinate's face.

"Impossible. It would paralyze operations in this sector."

"Then can we locate them?"

"Well... we've identified which terminal is being used, but—"

"—And?"

Gish asked, making no effort to conceal his irritation at the subordinate's hesitant words.

"We checked, but the terminal in question is not currently in active use. It appears the hacker has made a direct connection to a cable from behind a wall or above a ceiling, and is hacking from there."

"If you know that much, obviously you've already sent security there, right?"

"..."

"Send them now! This instant! Capture those hackers no matter what! I'm on my way there too!"

"U-understood—"

Click.

Gish cut the communication before his subordinate finished speaking.

—Incompetent idiots! Do they really understand how important this facility is!?

Cursing inwardly, Gish took a few of his men and left the security room.

Gish himself understood perfectly well how important Kelvin was. Not "to Wilkins Corporation"—"to Wisp."

From some location—he hadn't been told where—a spacecraft of an extinct civilization, called a Lost Ship, had been brought to this Kelvin and was housed here. And alongside it, a fleet of space combat vessels built by analyzing and reverse-engineering its technology.

There were parts that defied analysis and aspects that couldn't be technically replicated, so the copies produced here fell far short of the original's performance—but even so, they exceeded the capabilities of any modern spacecraft by a wide margin.

Wisp intended to mass-produce these, annihilate and absorb every other criminal organization in the galaxy, and eventually displace Nightmare to seize control of the galactic underworld.

But—

One day, they were stunned when Laglude Corporation filed a patent for a targeting system. Anyone who knew what to look for could recognize it immediately—it, too, was reverse-engineered from Lost Ship technology.

Laglude had apparently obtained a Lost Ship through some means of their own and was trying to commercially monopolize the technology.

That was Wisp's assessment.

No matter how many Lost Ship copies they produced, their advantage would be worthless if the technology leaked into the wider world. That was precisely why they had used their copy fleet to erase the company called Laglude Corporation from existence.

The raid—doubling as a field test—produced results that exceeded expectations. The fleet was nearly invisible to standard radar, easily swept aside the Universal Guardians, and toyed with even the Universal Force fleet.

The results were satisfying enough that one of Wisp's top members, only half-jokingly, had said: "At this rate, we could take over more than just the underworld—we could take the whole galaxy if we wanted."

Now all that remained was to build as many copy warships as possible and wait for the moment to act. At the very least, until the day Wisp claimed the entire galactic underworld, the secret of Kelvin had to be protected at any cost.

That was precisely why Gish—one of Wisp's top five operatives—had been posted to Kelvin. And he wasn't the only one—Wisp members were scattered throughout the research staff and business personnel. The security guards and control room staff were uniformly clad in uniforms, but every single one of them was an organization member.

The guard who'd made the report was. And the subordinates now following Gish were too.

Suppressing his irritation, Gish stepped into the high-speed pneumatic tube and departed.

* * *

"...Are we done yet?"

Kane's faintly impatient voice sounded softly in the dark.

Naturally, there was no ventilation running in this space. The air was stale, carrying a vague smell of machine oil from somewhere, and they were in complete darkness with pursuit that could arrive at any moment. Expecting anyone to stay calm in these conditions would have been unreasonable.

"Not yet," Milly replied, her voice steady.

She was anxious too, of course—but she understood full well that anxiety wouldn't help. Right now, map data was still being copied over; they were simply in a waiting period. How long it would take, even Milly couldn't honestly say. It depended heavily on the processing power of Kelvin's computer versus their handheld, and on the content and density of the programs involved.

...ugh... mmm...

Somewhere distant, a sound reached them—faintly.

The walls were completely soundproofed. So it wasn't coming from beyond the walls.

"...Pursuit..." Kane murmured bitterly.

"Kane! Kill the light!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes! All we're doing is waiting! Getting found is a bigger problem right now!"

She said so and snapped the handheld computer's display shut.

The light from the display had nowhere to go, and the space fell into darkness. Not complete darkness—small pilot lights on connectors and sensors dotted the dark like the eyes of animals in the night—but not enough light to see clearly. Eyes adjusting to the dark could pick out a silhouette nearby, but not much more.

In the darkness, Kane scanned the space—and caught the flicker of a distant light for just an instant. Probably the light from a pursuer's torch.

He kept his eyes on it, and soon the flash came again, clearly—and then two, three more.

...Damn it... why do we have to be sneaking around like rats like this...

Who cares. To hell with it. I don't know if they're industrial spies or what, but when we find them, we'll beat them to a pulp.

Words like these drifted through the narrow space to Kane's ears.

"—Are we done yet!? Milly!?"

He knew calling out wouldn't help, but he murmured it anyway.

—Not yet, she was about to reply—but before she could open her mouth—

Beep-beep-beep.

A small electronic tone sounded.

"—Done!"

She ripped out the cable connection.

...Hey, did anyone just hear something?

The sound had apparently reached their pursuers—their voices echoed in response.

...Think so. Sounded like an alarm...

But which direction?

The sound had bounced around and they couldn't pinpoint it. Flashlight beams swept wildly in all directions.

The lights flashed over Kane and Milly for a moment—but the pursuers gave no sign of noticing.

"...Let's go."

Kane began crawling in the opposite direction from the pursuers, and Milly followed his shadow.

It was cramped, visibility was poor, and cables and pipes were strung in every direction—movement was extremely difficult. But the same was true for those chasing them.

The problem, however, was that the home advantage was on the other side.

Honestly, neither Kane nor Milly had any clear idea of exactly where they were or where they were going.

For the time being, the two pressed blindly forward—

And a beam of light swept across their path.

—Directly ahead.

Something moved!

A voice from somewhere.

"...A second team!? Milly! Turn left!"

"Got it!... But why left!?"

"No reason!"

Kane said it with complete confidence.

Milly was sorely tempted to call him out on that, but this wasn't the time. The two scrambled and zigzagged through the space, but the other side had apparently sent a large number of people, and lights searching for them flashed ahead wherever they tried to go.

"...This is bad... it's only a matter of time at this rate."

"To hell with it! Should we just break out somewhere?!"

"That's insane! We don't know where we'd come out, and they'd know exactly where we are!"

"Once we're out, we can deal with whoever's chasing us! At this point, it's all or nothing!"

With that, Kane pulled the Psy Blade from his waist pouch. He tied a bandana around his forehead, kept the amplifier in the pouch, and took out only the oscillator.

Vzzt!

A blade flashed into existence for just a moment, cutting a small hole in the floor—or rather, the ceiling panel—and he peeked through to see what was below.

It was some kind of materials warehouse. A dim, cavernously wide space, boxes of all sizes piled in stacks. No sign of anyone around—probably not used much.

The distance to the floor was roughly seven or eight meters.

"Let's go."

He nodded, generated the Psy Blade again, and carved a circle roughly sixty to seventy centimeters in diameter in the ceiling panel. He didn't cut all the way through—leaving a few centimeters connected, then pushed that flap outward, like opening a can with a can opener.

—There's a light! That's no flashlight!

Is that the spies!? That way!

The glow of the Psy Blade had been spotted—voices came from deeper in the dark behind them.

"Milly! Drop down through there! There's probably a camera, so keep your face covered!"

"Got it!"

She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket, covered the lower half of her face, bent down and peered through the hole—

"Don't be insane!!"

She gave an involuntary half-sobbing scream.

"We'd probably die falling from here!?"

"You'll be fine! It looks farther than it is because it's dark! Just go, hurry!"

"It does not look fine..."

She started to argue—and then suddenly realized something.

"—Oh. Right. I get it."

She said so, and crawled to the edge of the hole. Then, feet first, she slipped through the opening and dropped—

From seven or eight meters up—roughly the height of a two-story rooftop—Milly drifted gently down and landed with a soft thud.

The artificial gravity generator in this warehouse was set to an extremely low level. The residential blocks had been set to approximately 1G—close to the gravity of Earth, humanity's planet of origin. But here in the warehouse, probably for the ease of moving heavy cargo, it was down to about one-tenth G. Which meant her body weighed one-tenth what it normally did. That was why falling from this height left her completely unharmed.

Kane looked around, cut out a section of a nearby duct with his Psy Blade, took the panel, folded his blade cable in two, hooked the loop end onto a nearby structural support, held the other end, and lowered himself through the hole.

This left him dangling from the ceiling, gripping the cable with his left hand supporting his full weight.

In normal gravity, this would have been a considerable feat—but in the low gravity here, it was manageable.

He pushed the panel back up behind him and resealed it, then used the cut-out piece as a patch. He drew the Psy Blade narrowly and "welded" the flap shut. Then he unclipped one end of the cable connector and let go.

The air whistled past his ear, and he landed on the warehouse floor.

He'd covered half his face with a handkerchief before coming down, of course.

When he landed, Milly was already pulling out her handheld computer and tapping at the keyboard.

"—Let's move."

Kane started running on instinct.

Moving blindly in an unknown location was risky, but staying put wasn't an option either. The warehouse had minimal lighting—just enough to see where to step. In the corner of the ceiling, a small red pilot light and a square shadow—probably a security camera.

If there was a camera, security personnel were almost certainly already heading this way. There was no time to waste.

"—Wait! You're going the wrong way!"

Milly's voice stopped him in his tracks.

"I just checked the map data we pulled! That direction is toward the offices—people will be there! This way!"

She took off running in the exact opposite direction.

"—Right."

Kane scrambled after her.

The unfamiliar gravity made running awkward and uncomfortable. Still, they made it to the far wall. The door leading to the next sector was, of course, locked—card key reader, retinal scanner, fingerprint sensor, all the serious hardware mounted on the wall beside it—but Kane paid none of it any attention and simply cut through the door itself with his Psy Blade.

As he was squeezing through, it occurred to him—he fired the blade and destroyed the security camera.

The next room was another warehouse.

He shot out the cameras there first, then moved to the next door. Beyond it was a spacecraft maintenance bay—a small one, just barely large enough for a single ship.

Both of them instinctively stopped.

No one appeared to be working here either. But instead—for lack of a better phrase—sitting in the center of the space was a black mass.

A single mid-sized spacecraft.

"...Could this be it? The smuggled warship...?"

"No... I don't think so. If it were, there'd be more people around. But... doesn't this ship's design look familiar to you?"

"...Now that you mention it..."

Milly looked again at the ship before them. About 300 meters in length, maybe slightly more. The silhouette emerging from the dim lighting did seem strangely familiar.

The streamlined hull, covered in organically shaped black armor—

"I remember now!"

Milly suddenly raised her voice.

"Look, Kane! That's what it reminds me of! The ship the pirates used before when we fought them!"

"...!?"

Kane let out a low sound in his throat.

She was right. No question about it.

In the incident involving Laglude and the pirates, a single black spacecraft had appeared before them. This one looked somewhat different in certain details, but the overall impression was identical.

"...Then... could this also be...?"

He said in a dry voice:

"...A Lost Ship?"

"Those rats got in there!"

That was the first thing Gish heard when he reached Security Room 15. It had taken roughly fifteen minutes via the high-speed pneumatic tube from the central section. He'd harbored a faint hope that by the time he arrived, he might hear a report of the intruders being captured—

But the situation had apparently taken a turn for the worse.

"—Mr. Gish!?"

At the sound of the door opening, the security room chief turned to face Gish, his face pale with terror and tension.

"M-Mr. Gish...! About—"

"Situation?"

His voice carried unmistakable anger and contempt.

"W-we mobilized everyone available and searched the spaces between walls and ceilings, but..."

"I'm asking what the current status is!"

"Y-yes sir! They're currently in the 105-X factory..."

"They're there!?"

"Um... about that..."

"They've seen it, haven't they."

Gish closed in on the cowering room chief.

The Lost Ship brought in from somewhere was housed in that factory. Its main components had been disassembled for study and distributed to various research facilities, but even so—anyone with a working knowledge of machinery would recognize at a glance that this thing was beyond the reach of human technology.

"—I've contacted security rooms in other sectors and requested backup! A considerable number of people should already be heading to that warehouse, so they should be captured shortly!"

The room chief scrambled to reassure him. Gish fixed him with a cold look.

"'Should be' isn't good enough! Capture them—period!"

"Y-yes sir!"

"And what do these rats look like?"

"A man and a woman—they're on camera right now!"

Gish turned to the display—and froze on the spot.

In the dim factory, a man and a woman stood motionless, staring up at the ship stored there. The camera distance and low lighting made their features unclear, and both had covered the lower halves of their faces.

But—

A blond woman, and a man in a dark cape with brown hair.

Setting aside hair color and gender—a cape, of all things, was not exactly a common fashion choice these days.

"...Those two..."

Gish's jaw clenched.

How the hell did they get inside Kelvin in that situation!? They were in the cockpit when the ship launched—I saw them on the feed!

He was tempted to capture them and find out—but getting hold of them was the more immediate priority.

"Tell all security personnel: do not let those rats escape, under any circumstances! Use of deadly force is authorized!"

"U-understood!"

The room chief relayed the order over the radio. On the screen, the man suddenly seemed to snap out of his daze and turned something cylindrical toward the camera.

A flash.

The screen dissolved into static.

"Almost there!"

The guards chasing the intruders had nearly reached the warehouse in question. About ten of them were lined up outside the locked door, with more continuously converging on their position. The longer they waited, the larger the numbers would grow.

Beyond this door was Warehouse 103-D—where the intruders had dropped down from the ceiling space. Two intruders, reported to be carrying a strange weapon that served as both a laser torch and an energy gun. But the guards were all carrying laser guns and had been authorized to shoot to kill.

There was, however, one problem—the door in front of them.

Double and triple-locked to keep intruders out, it was built to stop anyone trying to access classified areas. But when those intruders started slashing through everything in their path with reckless, primitive force, the heavily reinforced door became an obstacle for the pursuers.

A master key that would bypass card reader, retinal scanner, and fingerprint sensor all at once did exist—but it wasn't the kind of thing a regular guard just walked around with. The roughly ten guards currently outside this door were there simply because they'd happened to be nearby when the call came in. There was no logical reason any of them would have a master key.

Each sector's security center kept one, but it was far faster to call someone to bring it than to go fetch it. In the end, after checking with the security room, they resorted to the same method the intruders had used—burning through the door with a laser torch.

They borrowed one from a nearby tool room and got to work.

—Move it! Intruders are on the move!

The radio crackled with that message just as the job was about halfway done.

From 105-X, they've breached the door into 106-E and destroyed the camera inside!

"Our work is almost finished! We'll breach and apprehend the moment we're through!"

A free guard answered.

By the time the laser torch finally cut through the door, the group assembled outside had swelled to about twenty.

"Move! Don't let them escape!"

As one, they poured through the door. They swept through the materials warehouse, sprinted through another warehouse beyond it, passed through the large bay where the spacecraft was stored, and flooded into warehouse 106-E—the last confirmed location of the intruders.

As expected, this one was stacked high with boxes of all sizes, plenty of blind spots everywhere.

"...When we find those bastards, they won't get off easy..."

"Shouldn't a few of us stay by the entrance?"

Muttering among themselves, several stayed near the door while others spread out and pressed deeper inside.

"—Hey! Over here!"

A shout went up shortly after.

On the far side of the room, beside a door in the wall, was a hole gaping wide enough for a person to pass through comfortably.

Obviously the intruders had cut it. Between the walls, there was a gap just barely wide enough for a person turned sideways to squeeze through.

"...They escaped this way..."

One guard lit up the interior with a flashlight. Structural supports, pipes, and cables jutted in every direction, materializing in the weak beam.

At first glance, no sign of the intruders in the visible range—but...

"Like cockroaches or moles, these two..."

Another guard radioed in to the security room to report the situation.

"—There's another large hole cut in the wall beside the door. The rats appear to have crawled back into the walls again."

—If you know that, pursue them already!

"Y-yes sir!"

He snapped a response and cut the comm.

"...What did they say?"

He gave a small shrug to a colleague.

"'Pursue.' We're supposed to crawl around like cockroaches ourselves."

"...Figures. Easy for the guys upstairs—sitting there yelling at monitors, making more money than us for it. ...Honestly, this is worse than when I was dealing drugs out in the real world..."

Grumbling all the while, they squeezed one by one into the gap behind the wall.

* * *

At that same moment—

Kane and Milly were crawling through another cramped space.

But not between the walls the security guards were searching.

After destroying the camera in 106-E—the deepest warehouse—and cutting a large hole in the wall beside the door, they had doubled back to the first warehouse, 103, and cut a circular hole in the floor.

From among the nearby supply boxes, they picked the largest-looking but lightest ones they could find, and placed them so their edges hung over the hole. Then they slipped down through the hole themselves, and from below pushed the boxes into position, plugging the hole above them.

The position of the hole and the boxes had been arranged, of course, so they wouldn't be obvious to guards pouring in—and the ruse had worked.

They crawled for a while and then stopped.

* * *

The multi-layered locks protecting critical facilities were not something even a first-rate hacker could easily break. But they had been rendered useless by the intruders' rough and primitive methods.

If possible, Gish would have preferred to take them alive—find out their purpose, their handlers, and how they'd infiltrated Kelvin in the first place. But that luxury was not available.

If he could protect Kelvin's secrets until the day Wisp brought down Nightmare, his standing within the organization would certainly rise. He'd privately thought it might not even be impossible to aim for the very top.

But conversely—if the secret got out now and the plan unraveled, he would unquestionably face the organization's retribution.

So no matter what—

"—I'm moving."

Gish announced it abruptly.

He'd realized it. Where the place that truly needed protecting was.

"W-where are you going?"

He glanced at the room chief who'd asked.

"Block 0-Z. If not there, where?"

* * *

"...We should be... around here somewhere..."

Milly kept her voice low in the dark.

It was roughly two hours later that Kane and Milly reached the area near the target sector. They hadn't, of course, spent those two hours crawling through walls. Milly had said it was "close," but there was still roughly five kilometers to cover. Rather than crawl every meter, they'd emerged briefly into a nearby residential block, closed the gap as much as they could, then slipped back between the walls.

Their faces had been circulated throughout the residential areas too. Large-screen TVs on street corners were showing their faces frequently between programs, calling on citizens to report suspicious individuals and help "apprehend industrial spies."

But Kane and Milly had anticipated this and prepared a disguise. They changed their hair, used Milly's makeup to add shading at key points on their faces, and Kane removed his cape—a disguise barely more sophisticated than children playing dress-up. Whether it worked, or whether passersby simply didn't pay attention, no one gave them a second glance. Even security guards they passed two or three times in the streets showed no sign of recognizing them.

And so the two had made it here safely.

"—This is definitely the place. The other side of this wall is that block. We should come out somewhere near the top."

Milly confirmed their position on the handheld computer.

"Near the top" referred to the direction the artificial gravity pointed—upward, in this context. Judging by how things felt, there was a faint artificial gravity here too, about one-tenth G.

"Near the top—so there's a significant height to deal with?"

"Yes. By this map, roughly—five kilometers top to bottom."

"Five kilometers!?"

"Yes. Ten kilometers wide, about twenty kilometers long. A small space factory would fit inside it easily. And the fact that the map data has no information whatsoever on what it's used for is blatantly suspicious."

"...I see... In that case, it might be time for this."

From his pack, Kane produced a small camera that fit in the palm of his hand. Canal had modified a standard video camera to transmit footage directly to the Swordbreaker. That meant the moment Kane filmed the illegal warships, the footage would pass through the Swordbreaker and reach client Tania. After that, all they needed to do was slip away in the confusion when the Universal Guardians came to investigate Kelvin.

"Then first... let's take a look inside..."

Using the Psy Blade at minimum intensity, Kane cut a small hole in the wall and peered through.

What he saw in the dimly lit, impossibly vast space was like a giant multi-story automated parking structure.

Except what was parked there wasn't cars—it was an endless number of black spacecraft.

And strung through the space like an immense spider's web: catwalks crisscrossing in every direction.

On one of those catwalks, not far from where Kane and Milly were—

Several guards, guns trained directly on them.

"We’ve been spotted! Run!"

Gunfire came the instant Kane shouted.

Thwt! Thwt!

Holes appeared in the wall beside them without a sound, and red light sliced through the dark.

"WHAT!?"

"A laser!?"

They'd probably spotted the Psy Blade's glow when Kane cut through the wall.

The guards were absolutely trying to kill them.

Even though the guards couldn't actually see them through the wall and were firing by estimate, their numbers would only keep growing, and in this cramped space between walls, movement was severely limited. If this kept up, they'd eventually be shot right through the wall.

"Damn it! We have to run!"

Kane slashed at the back wall—the one not facing Block 0-Z—with his Psy Blade. His plan was to break through that side and escape into a different sector.

But—

When the Psy Blade cut a rectangle in the wall, there was another wall right behind it.

"—What is this!?"

"Bedrock!"

Milly answered Kane's shout.

"It's left over from when this was an asteroid! It's thick—cutting through is impossible! We'll have to go through the gaps sideways!"

"That'll take too long!"

Kane raised his voice. Even as they spoke, laser bolts were punching through the wall with increasing frequency. More guards were arriving.

"Then we go inside!"

"...Inside...?"

Before Milly could process what Kane meant, the Psy Blade blazed in the darkness.

...Chrank...

A section of wall gave a heavy thud as it shifted away into empty space.

Through the man-sized gap Kane had carved, catwalks ran in every direction, guards converging from their positions. And beyond them—countless spacecraft.

Block 0-Z.

Kane checked through the hole he'd cut. If Milly's data was right, it was nearly five kilometers to the bottom. Even without a fear of heights, it was enough to make anyone lightheaded.

In low gravity or not, falling that far would leave nothing behind. Against the vast scale of this space, the catwalks themselves looked like nothing more than strands of thread.

But there was no other choice.

"—Jump!"

"...Huh...!? Wait—!?"

Kane leaped before Milly could lodge her protest!

"WAIT!!!"

Screaming, with no other option, Milly threw herself into the void too!

The wind howled past their ears.

In what felt like both a long and a short stretch of time—

CLANG!

Both of them landed on a catwalk with the ring of boots on metal.

"...Ohhh my GOD..."

Milly gasped for breath and looked back up at the hole they'd come from. From here, it didn't look that high at all.

"No time to recover! Run!"

Kane was already sprinting, and Milly took off after him. Laser fire from guards above scorched through the catwalk section they'd just left.

The catwalks had handrails, but they were barely work platforms—the drop below was in full view, and with every step the metal floor—the entire catwalk—shuddered and swayed. They were running on it at nearly full speed. Every instinct screamed to stop, but stopping meant becoming a target for a volley of laser fire.

"Damn it!"

Running hard, Kane brought up the video camera in his left hand and swept it across the scene.

The footage would be shaky, but the images would reach Tania through the Swordbreaker—this vast space, the countless illegal warships, the catwalks crisscrossing it all, and guards firing at them from every direction.

"Kane! Ahead!"

He looked where Milly pointed. Guards were massing on the catwalk in front of them. More were descending from above via stairs.

At a rough count—about twenty.

"Intruders! Stop where you are! If you cooperate, we won't kill you!"

The guards shouted the unconvincing words with murder in their eyes as they stormed forward, footsteps hammering the metal.

"What do we do!?"

"Scatter them."

Kane answered Milly's question without hesitation and brought the Psy Blade to life in his right hand. He swung the blade down toward the catwalk floor.

Groan!

With a screech of tortured metal, the catwalk lurched heavily as its support was more than half severed.

Guards: *AAAUGH!?*

Milly: *HYEEEK!?*

Screams from both sides. The guards bore the worst of the tilt, but not badly enough to send anyone plummeting.

But it was more than enough to spark panic.

"The catwalk's going down!"

"Back! Everyone back!"

"That guy's INSANE!"

Shouting over each other, they scrambled back the way they'd come.

"Now's our chance!"

Kane and Milly turned and sprinted the other way. Then—

A searing sense of killing intent made both of them spin around simultaneously, and both froze.

On a nearby catwalk—facing them—stood a man.

Someone they recognized.

The man who had greeted them when they'd arrived at Kelvin with their fabricated malfunction—gray hair, a suit. If they remembered correctly, his name was Gish. The head of security.

But that wasn't what froze them.

What he was holding—a low-recoil hand-held bazooka, aimed directly at them.

"Are you SERIOUS!?"

"You've got to be kidding!"

It happened simultaneously—Kane and Milly both shouted, and Gish pulled the trigger.

They threw themselves in opposite directions.

BOOM!

The bazooka's round slammed into the exact center between them, and a section of the catwalk was blown clean off.

—And then—

...GROAN... creak...

The long catwalk, severed in the middle, began to slowly fold downward.

CLANG!

A dull impact and a jarring sound. With some residual swaying, the motion of the collapsing catwalk stopped.

"...What... what happened...?"

Clinging to the handrail, Milly looked around. Apparently a lower catwalk had caught the falling section, stopping it.

"—Where's Kane!?"

She looked quickly toward the other section—and found it had bent and dropped away entirely. But on one of the catwalks below and slightly to the side, Kane was there, giving a casual wave in her direction. He'd apparently managed to grab onto another catwalk safely.

Gish was already gone from where he'd been standing. Either off to get a heavier weapon, or on the move to pursue one of them.

Either way, Milly couldn't exactly stay clinging to a tilted catwalk. She needed to regroup with Kane. Using the handrail for grip, she worked her way hand over hand until she could step onto the connected catwalk below.

A few guards had appeared at the far end of the tilted catwalk she'd descended, but apparently none of them had the nerve to slide down after her—they just stood there, helplessly watching.

—Good. Better do this while I can!

Milly broke into a sprint along the catwalk toward the door in the far wall.

About two hundred meters.

Expecting guards to come through that door, she swung her right hand around to her lower back—and stopped dead in her tracks.

Her paralysis gun—the one she always carried there—was gone. It must have fallen out while she was crawling through the walls, or in the chaos just now. Without it, fighting back if it came to that would be nearly impossible.

But that didn't mean giving up. She steadied herself and started running again.

—Fifty meters to the door—

Without warning, the door directly ahead swung open.

Two guards stood on the other side. Laser guns in hand.

Too much distance to rush them.

Whether to kill or merely intimidate—both raised their weapons at Milly—

Two beams of light seared through empty space.

Shot neatly through the forehead, the guards crumpled on the spot.

The shooter was beyond them, deeper in the corridor—behind where the guards had been standing.

"—Kane!?"

Milly called out and started to run toward him—then stopped again.

It wasn't Kane.

What had shot through the guards' foreheads was indeed the light of a Psy Blade. But—

The man was slowly walking forward out of the shadows. A Psy Blade oscillator in his right hand—but no bandana, no amplifier. He had shaped the blade using mental energy alone, raised to a level completely beyond human norms.

Milly recognized him.

Hair that burned with the color of golden flame. A slightly lean face with refined features. In the depths of violet-tinted eyes, an inscrutable light slept.

She'd met him once before, in the incident involving the pirates.

—Or maybe even before that. Maybe they'd met sometime earlier.

She didn't know his name—but she had a general sense of what he was.

"...Nightmare..."

Milly murmured, her voice, if anything, quiet and calm.

PHANTOM FLEET

"Forced search of Kelvin!?"

The captain frowned involuntarily at the order from headquarters.

"That's right. The charge is illegal construction and concealment of space battleships. The warrant has already been issued. —I'm counting on you. Your ship is the closest."

The superior officer on the display said it without changing his expression in the slightest.

"...Yes sir... understood..."

He answered, snapped a salute—and the communication ended.

Fundamentally, the Universal Guardians maintained a permanent presence only on planets with surface-dwelling populations. In the Karua system, that was the third planet. Wilkins Corporation also had experimental space factories in orbit around the other planets, but it wasn't as though they could force their way into a private facility and take up residence—so the Guardians contented themselves with regular patrol circuits.

The message had come just as the patrol vessel passed close to the fifth planet, where Kelvin orbited. But—when had they gathered enough evidence to obtain a warrant?

The captain inwardly tilted his head in puzzlement. It was something of an open secret that Wilkins Corporation served as a front for the criminal organization Wisp. But it hadn't seemed as though anyone had managed to catch them at anything concrete yet.

The biggest obstacle had been the non-cooperation of the local police—word had it that many of them had undisclosed ties to Wisp themselves, and there was no shortage of resistance to the Universal Guardians coming in and throwing their weight around. And now, suddenly, from out of nowhere, the order came to investigate because "they're secretly building warships at Kelvin."

Had an undercover agent been sent in somewhere along the way?

But regardless—there was only one path available to him.

Follow orders and conduct the forced search.

He switched on the ship-wide broadcast system in front of the captain's chair:

"Captain to all crew! Captain to all crew! This vessel will now change course and conduct a forced search of Wilkins Corporation's experimental space factory Kelvin, currently in orbit around the fifth planet! All investigators prepare for boarding and search operations!"

A flurry of urgency filled the interior of the patrol vessel.

"Millennium."

The man called her name in a quiet voice.

Why did this man know her name?

The question didn't occur to her.

For some reason, it felt to Milly perfectly natural that he should.

The man held her gaze steadily and said:

"Why have you left the place you belong, and come to a place like this? Return—to where you should be."

"...The place... I belong...?"

Milly murmured, half in a daze, then gave a faint wry smile.

"—I see."

She looked directly at him.

"But I'm afraid you have the wrong person. My name is Millennium Feria Nocturne. And right now—the place I belong is the Swordbreaker."

This time her voice was clear and decisive.

The man's quiet, bottomless gaze and Milly's resolved eyes met head-on for a long moment.

"Milly!?"

It was Kane's voice that broke the silence.

He was on a different catwalk, a short distance from where Milly stood.

"Are you alright!?"

He called out, but his eyes were fixed on the man who’s Psy Blade oscillator was aimed at him without a trace of lowered guard.

"—Hey! What the hell are you doing here!? You're a Nightmare member, aren't you!?"

Kane deliberately raised his voice.

That voice carried to the guards converging on their location—and to Gish.

But the man paid Kane no attention whatsoever. He turned to Milly with his calm, measured voice,

"You choose your own place to die. That, too, is acceptable."

He spoke—and turned on his heel.

"—Hey! Don't you ignore me!"

Even as he said it, Kane couldn't bring himself to move against the man.

—Not yet. I can't beat him.

He felt it half on instinct.

The one who moved—or tried to—was a guard. But—

Vzzt!

Without even turning around, the man's Psy Blade speared him through the chest. The guard crumpled with a small cry.

That was the trigger.

"Fire!"

Gish bellowed from where he stood planted on a catwalk.

Simultaneously, a dozen and more beams of laser light ripped through empty space.

Most of them were aimed at the man. By invoking the name of Nightmare, Kane had successfully turned the guards' hostility toward the stranger.

But the man evaded every single one of them with effortless ease and vanished back into the corridor he'd come from.

"Don't let him go! After him! Take out all three of them!"

Gish's voice was close to a scream.

First the two unidentified intruders, and now a Nightmare spy had slipped into Kelvin just as easily. The fact of it was making his blood boil.

He raised the blaster he'd brought himself, took aim at Kane—

Bzt. Bzt.

The emergency call tone on his hip-worn transceiver sounded.

For just an instant his attention slipped—the blaster shot went wide by a considerable margin.

"—Damn it! Now of all times!?"

Muttering irritably, he flipped on the transceiver switch.

The one he carried was different from the standard-issue models handed out to regular guards—it let him issue commands to guards directly and gave him a line to all security rooms and control rooms.

Getting an emergency call on this meant something had definitely happened—

"What is it!?"

He barked the moment the line opened.

"—G-Gish sir! It's an emergency...!"

"I don't care what it is, identify yourself first!"

"...Oh...! Yes sir...! This is Control Room One...! There's just now been a Universal Guardians patrol ship that's arrived and is telling us 'we are initiating a forced search of your facility'!"

"The Universal Guardians!?"

"Yes sir. They say they'll be docking in approximately ten minutes."

"Deny them! Tell them if they want to search the place, come back with a warrant!"

"That's the thing... they say they already have a warrant..."

"What!?"

Gish was silent for a moment.

"—Understood. I'm on my way there now."

* * *

"Heading back to you now."

Running hard through Kelvin's corridors, the man murmured to no one in particular.

He wasn't just running, of course—he was shooting down guards who came at him and cutting through doors that blocked his path as he went.

"Finished your errand?"

A voice reached him—his ears alone.

"Done. Found the Lost Ship imitations too. Quite a number of them—a hundred, two hundred at least. Ragudo Mezegis—even you would find it troublesome to deal with that many, wouldn't you?"

As he spoke, he released a Psy Blade shot and drilled a guard in the forehead.

"Quite so... For dealing with that many, there is someone better suited than I."

"Gorun Nova."

"Exactly. —As it happens, I've already called it nearby."

"...You work fast."

He murmured it and kept running—toward the rendezvous point with Ragudo Mezegis.

"What is the Universal Guardians' status!?"

Gish appeared in Control Room One, raising his voice.

"Mr. Gish...! That patrol ship is still closing! We intercepted their communications—other patrol vessels are also heading our way!"

"And? Have you confirmed they actually have a warrant?"

"Yes. They do have the warrant in hand. ...What do we do...?"

"Obviously—"

"Mr. Gish!"

His words were cut off as a communications officer's voice rang out.

"Incoming transmission from the patrol vessel!"

"—Connect it."

Moments later, a man's face appeared on the main display.

"This is Captain Grain North of the Universal Guardians patrol vessel Wales. We are proceeding to dock at Kelvin and conduct a forced search. Please guide us in for landing."

"Refused."

Gish's flat refusal came without a moment's pause, and not only the captain on screen but the entire Kelvin control room staff froze for an instant.

"—My, my. And what exactly does that mean?"

"Exactly what I said. Kelvin is Wilkins Corporation's most classified facility. You just show up and announce a 'forced search'!? Don't make me laugh! There apparently is a warrant—but I want a satisfactory explanation of exactly what evidence gave rise to it!"

"No explanation is required. Whatever excuses you choose to make, we have a valid warrant. That is the fact, and that is all."

The captain said it—though honestly, he himself had no idea what circumstances had produced the warrant, not that he could admit as much.

He kept his composure and pressed on:

"Refuse cooperation if you like. But you cannot refuse the search itself. We'll ram an anchor tube through and board you on our own."

"Do it if you can."

Gish said it coldly and cut the communication.

"—Mr. Gish!?"

The control room chief immediately protested.

"What are you doing provoking the Universal Guardians like that!? We should handle this more quietly..."

"Quietly!? Ha! Handle it quietly—and do what!? Bow and scrape and invite them in!? You think when they find that fleet they'll just take our word for it that we know nothing about it!? Or would you rather get caught peacefully and wait for the organization's retribution!?"

Every face in the control room hardened at Gish's words. Needless to say, everyone present was an organization member—civilian employees were kept away precisely to avoid complications. Which was why the single word "retribution" landed so heavily.

For them, getting arrested by the Universal Guardians was—honestly—not the most terrifying outcome. The worst the Guardians could do was arrest them and put them on trial; as long as they didn't resist violently, nothing extreme would happen to them.

But the organization was different.

Members who got caught through carelessness were routinely silenced to prevent leaks, and those who made serious mistakes or turned informant had been known to have their entire families eliminated as an example.

If the Universal Guardians discovered that fleet here and the plan collapsed, every member present would almost certainly face some form of retribution.

"...B-but then... what do you intend to do...? They're probably seriously going to ram an anchor tube in and—"

...bzzz...

Before the control room chief finished speaking, a faint vibration reached them.

"—Here they come! Those Guardian dogs!"

"No—that's not them!"

A staff member contradicted Gish.

"The patrol vessel is still too far away for a forced docking!"

"...Then what caused that vibration...?"

"Emergency contact from Security Room 14!"

A communications officer called out—then fell silent, brow furrowed.

"—What is it!?"

The officer looked genuinely confused.

"...Well... according to security room 14... dock D-150 has... an unidentified spacecraft that's entered the dock."

"...What!?"

The report was so absurd that even Gish went momentarily speechless.

With Lost Ship-derived radar protecting Kelvin, how was that even possible?

"Apparently... the dock hatch was breached without warning, and a ship no one recognized entered the dock."

Even the communications officer relaying it sounded more baffled than alarmed.

"That's impossible... The radar showed no reading, correct?"

Gish asked, his usual edge slightly blunted.

"None at all... They're requesting authorization to engage..."

At the word "engage," Gish snapped back to full attention. Unbelievable as it was, he couldn't simply ignore something that had just barged into Kelvin.

"Understood. Authorize takedown. —Though Kelvin's air defense systems may not be sufficient... In that case, deploy Phantom Ships."

"W-what!?"

The control room chief nearly leaped out of his chair.

Phantom Ships—that was the code name for the copy warships.

"The Universal Guardians are right on top of us! They'll absolutely see them!"

"So what. We'll just sink them along with everything else."

"That's insane!"

"It's not insane. When we hit Laglude, we ran rings around the Universal Force. Even if the Guardians call in the Force—that fleet can hold its own against the Force too."

"B-but! If we act this independently, the people above us won't stand for it!"

"Moving the fleet on our own is less of a problem than having the fleet fall into the hands of the Guardians or the Force! We pull out every piece of documentation we can carry, launch every Phantom Ship we can launch. Once that's done, we sink Kelvin."

"Sink Kelvin!?"

"Yes. The Phantom Ships combined should be able to manage it. Bombard it to pieces, or alter its trajectory and let it sink into Macfield's gas ocean—either works. Without Kelvin as evidence, it becomes much harder for the Guardians to pursue us afterward. After disposing of Kelvin, the Phantom Fleet breaks off pursuit, withdraws, and contacts organization headquarters when the time is right. We still have a chance at recovery this way, and if things go well, we can wrap this up before the Force even arrives. We'll face punishment, certainly—but that's better than surrendering quietly to the Guardians and having the Phantom Fleet's existence become public knowledge. If anyone has a better plan, I'm listening."

A brief silence fell over the control room—

"...Understood..."

The chief nodded with a heavy voice.

"—Something happened... something's wrong..."

Kane paused in his run and murmured softly.

"Come to think of it... we haven't seen a single guard in a while," Milly noted with a frown.

After a brief encounter with the Psy Blade-wielding man in Block 0-Z, Kane and Milly had somehow managed to regroup with each other. But since then, security personnel had been conspicuously absent. Even accounting for the fact that they'd been distracted by that man—it was strange that not a single guard had come their way.

Running through the corridor, Kane raised the wrist communicator-watch to his mouth and called the Swordbreaker.

"Canal! What's going on out there!?"

"The footage you sent earlier got the Universal Guardians moving. There's a patrol vessel, it's close."

"That was fast... So the guards went into a panic over that and don't have time to worry about us. —Which means there's no reason for us to still be here. Time to pull out! Sorry Canal, can you come pick us up!?"

"..."

"—Canal? What is it?"

"...No... Kane, be careful. Nightmare is nearby. I can’t risk getting close."

"...Yeah... I know. We already ran into them."

"A-already ran into them...? And you're both still in one piece...!?"

"We are. Anyway, details later when we meet up. Come pick us up."

"...Understood..."

An unusually hesitant reply from Canal.

"But when did you manage to send footage?" Milly asked.

"In the chaos a while back."

"...That's impressive... Anyway, so now we just need to escape..."

"There should be escape pods somewhere in Kelvin. We'll find one and get out. —Milly, which way from here to the nearest pod?"

"...Well... about that... I kind of dropped the handheld computer..."

"Dropped it!?"

Kane's voice jumped involuntarily, and Milly cringed slightly.

"I mean... we were jumping from catwalk to catwalk like that. There's no way I could focus on not dropping it."

"...Fair enough, I suppose... But that means we're searching blind..."

"It'll be fine. Probably. Escape pods are almost always located near the outer hull—that's standard. There should be signs too. If we just head in the direction that feels 'outward,' we'll probably find one!"

"...Is that really going to work..."

Residual unease lingered, but with no better option, the two started running through the corridors at random.

"Emergency contact from Security Room 14! The unidentified spacecraft is taking off!"

Reports were flying in one after another, and Control Room One was thick with urgency.

"Don't let it escape! Authorize use of anti-air cannons! Phantom Ships—how many are ready to launch!? Launch them as they become ready! —But what was that ship's purpose here, anyway...?"

"According to the report, someone boarded that ship just before it took off."

"One person...! Then—is it him!?"

The image of the man from Block 0-Z flashed in Gish's mind. The other two intruders had called him a Nightmare member...

"...Then that ship is Nightmare's too... But how did it slip through our radar!?"

"That... we can't say..."

The communications officer tilted his head.

If Gish had thought to ask for footage of that spacecraft at this moment, he might have noticed. The visual design of that ship was strikingly similar to the Lost Ship housed here.

But in the swirl of incoming information, the thought never occurred to him.

"Five Phantom Ships leading group have launched!"

Another operator called out.

"Good! Dispatch three to pursue and destroy the unknown vessel! The other two—sink the Guardians' patrol ship! Status on document retrieval?"

"Sir... Phantom Ships 15 through 20 and their crews have been assigned to the removal operation, but we can't openly request cooperation from regular employees or researchers, so progress is poor. —Shall we redirect more manpower?"

"No, prioritize getting Phantom Ships out. I'd like to take the Lost Ship component samples if at all possible—make up some excuse and get research data and samples out of here!"

"Incoming communication from the Guardians' patrol vessel!"

"—Put it on main display."

Almost simultaneously with Gish's words, the patrol vessel captain's face appeared on the main display again. But the confidence that had been there before was completely gone.

"What's the meaning of this!? What exactly was that ship that just launched from your facility!?"

"What do you think it is?"

"You're not seriously considering resisting, are you!? Do you have any idea what will happen if you do!?"

His tone was aggressive, but his voice carried an unmistakable note of fear.

A Universal Guardians patrol vessel was, in its own way, a well-balanced spacecraft. Handled by a skilled captain, it could hold its own against an opponent in a similar class in a one-on-one fight. But that was strictly in a one-on-one scenario. Up against multiple opponents—especially larger ones—they were at an inherent disadvantage no matter what they did.

"What will happen? Do tell me—I'd genuinely like to know."

Gish kept his mocking tone without missing a beat.

"We'll call in the Universal Force!"

"—And then?"

"..."

Gish showed no change in expression, and the captain went silent for a moment.

"...I'm saying—if you resist pointlessly, we'll bring in the Force and crush you, that's what I'm saying!"

"Even if you call the Force now, I don't think it'll change your fate."

"...W-what do you mean!?"

Gish didn't answer the captain's question. Instead, he turned to the communications officer:

"Tell the Phantom Ships—just sink them, do it now."

"You—! Are you in your right—"

Before the captain could finish his words—

Without warning, the display dissolved into static.

"—The target patrol vessel has been destroyed."

A flat, matter-of-fact voice echoed through the control room.

Countless spacecraft moved through the dark, the light of stars at their backs.

Universal Force F-100-series Strike Cruiser Squadron. Comprising twenty-five fleet groups including supply vessels—approximately two hundred and fifty ships in total—they were, on that day, in the midst of a large-scale long-term exercise.

Among them was the F-112 Strike Cruiser Squadron and its flagship Grey Condor—the same unit that had encountered the unidentified fleet when Laglude Corporation was attacked.

—A Universal Guardians deployment request had come in—

When Captain Clyde heard the fleet admiral's all-ship broadcast from the Grey Condor's bridge, the memory of that encounter flashed briefly through his mind.

The admiral on the main display began explaining the situation.

"The incident site is in orbit around the fifth planet of the Karua system. Coincidentally, it is at a distance that could be described as quite close to our current fleet position."

The admiral didn't know why this long-term exercise had been scheduled at this time and in this place. Of course it was no coincidence—the unseen hand of Nightmare had been at work. The galaxy's largest criminal organization's reach was genuine. Its influence extended into upper levels of the military, and among politicians.

"A Universal Guardians patrol vessel that went to investigate Wilkins Corporation's experimental factory Kelvin in satellite orbit on charges of illegal ship construction was sunk by a vessel launched from Kelvin. This is the last footage the patrol vessel captured of the illegal construction ships."

The main display image switched—

"—Wh—"

Clyde found himself making an involuntary sound.

He would never forget. That silhouette—

"You'll recognize them. These are the same type of spacecraft as those in the fleet that attacked Planet Regn, as distributed in briefings last week."

The admiral's words continued over a computer-enhanced still image.

"Based on data to date, they are presumed to be highly capable with significant stealth capability among other features. Additionally, we do not know how many combat-ready vessels of this type remain inside Kelvin. Other units will arrive at the site eventually, but we will undoubtedly be the first there. Each of you is to remember without exception that these are opponents that must not be underestimated!—All ships, prepare for phase drive! Target: Karua system, stellar coordinate 6-2, space coordinate 5-2-7, drive level A, drive entry in zero-zero-ten!"

—And the fleet began to move toward Kelvin.

Around that same time, Kane and Milly had found themselves back in Block 0-Z.

"AGAIN! This isn't the right way!"

"Ugh! Can't you stop taking wrong turns!"

"Excuse me! You were just silently following behind me the whole time!"

"That's beside the point!... Actually that is entirely the point!"

Trying to get to wherever they might escape from, running through corridors without landmarks, they'd ended up in the same area again.

Milly let out a sigh and glanced around—

"Kane! The ships are moving!"

"What!?"

—Indeed they were.

Several of the black warships moored in their rack-style docks had fired thrusters and were lifting off, moving slowly in the direction away from where Kane and Milly stood.

"They're trying to escape! That's what they're doing!"

"Probably. But if that's the case... we need to get out of here fast too."

"Why? If the organization's people leave in a hurry, things should be less tightly guarded..."

"—And when they leave, do you think they'd just abandon this Kelvin? With mountains of evidence and documents in here?"

Milly went silent at Kane's question.

"Those people almost certainly don't want to let anyone else have their hands on that ship's technology. That's precisely why they went to the trouble of destroying Laglude. They'd want to take every last document with them, but they can't have that much time. There are probably some regular civilians among the research staff—that's another problem to deal with. But they can't just leave documents and researchers behind for the Guardians to pick up. Which only leaves one option. —Wipe out this Kelvin along with everything in it."

"...But that's... that's insane!?"

"But they've already done insane things—mass-producing Lost Ship copies, attacking a company. One more insane thing won't make much difference to them."

"..."

"And if Wisp doesn't do it, Nightmare will."

"Nightmare... will...?"

"Yes. That man earlier was a Nightmare member. Which means his purpose was probably to gather some kind of intelligence and get out. If what Canal said before is right, Nightmare wants to destroy that Lost Ship copy fleet. How do you eliminate it all at once? The answer is simple—take out Kelvin along with everything in it. Probably in not too long, another Nightmare Lost Ship is going to show up. —Actually, for all we know, it might already be here."

"...Whatever the case, we have no choice but to get out of here as fast as possible..."

Milly murmured in a hoarse voice.

"Exactly. So let's find those escape pods! Now!"

"Understood!... This time you go first, Kane..."

"You got it!"

He said so and started running.

—Incidentally—

Five minutes later, the two took the wrong turn and ended up in the same sector again.

"Universal Guardians vessels assembling in the vicinity! Current count approximately 10!"

"Phantom Ship launch operations proceeding on schedule. 26 ships have now launched from Kelvin."

"Document retrieval operation currently at approximately 5% progress!"

In Control Room One, reports continued to fly, and another piece of information reached Gish's ears.

"—The three Phantom Ships dispatched to pursue and destroy the unidentified vessel that intruded into Kelvin—they've gone dark!"

"What."

Gish frowned.

"'Gone dark'—what exactly does that mean?"

"That... well..."

The staff member faltered. Even he couldn't tell Gish more than he knew.

"...So... since contact disappeared abruptly... either they've jumped to phase drive, or they've been sunk. One of the two."

"I see... they lost their nerve and ran..."

Gish said it with contempt.

He assumed the disappeared contacts had simply fled.

It naturally never occurred to him that those three ships had been dispatched into oblivion with almost casual ease, and were now drifting as debris in empty space.

—He had too much faith in the Phantom Ships' abilities—ships that had outmaneuvered even the Universal Force.

"And? The unidentified ship they were pursuing—where is it?"

"...Well... about that..."

The radar operator hesitated again.

"...It never... showed up on radar at all... that's the thing..."

"There's no reason it wouldn't! Our radar here uses the same technology as that thing!"

"...But..."

"You must have been distracted by the Guardians' movements and missed it! Stop making useless excuses! ...I just hope those three ships sank it before they ran..."

"Incoming communication from a Universal Guardians patrol vessel!"

"It'll just be some worthless surrender demand! Ignore it!"

"—Actually..."

Gish grinned, a confident, predatory smile.

"—While we're at it, fine! Sink the lot of them! Put the footage on the main display! Shows like this don't come around often!"

At Gish's order, the main display image switched.

Kelvin's telescopic sensors locked onto a dark-blue hull floating in the void. Unmistakably a Universal Guardians patrol vessel. They were probably under the impression they'd stopped just outside effective range—but without warning, a single beam of light sliced through the darkness.

And—an explosion.

Silently, a ring of light spread across the display—and when it faded, the patrol vessel had vanished completely.

Spontaneous applause and cheering broke out in the control room.

"Ha! Did you see that, you Guardians!"

"Always acting so high and mighty—turns out you're helpless when it counts!"

"Look at that! They're running for their lives!"

The assembled staff jeered and shouted. Another patrol vessel went down, then a second, and it was only when the third began to go that the survivors apparently realized the Phantom Ships' effective range was dramatically greater than normal—the remaining patrol vessels reversed thrusters, came about, and began evasive action. But even then, the Phantom Ships' bombardment continued, and several more ships were reduced to dust in moments.

"Enjoy the show—but don't forget your real job."

Gish said it with a satisfied smile at the corner of his mouth. Being free for once to fight back against people who normally couldn't be touched because of their Universal Guardians credentials—it was rare and welcome entertainment for all of them.

The long standoff continued.

Several patrol vessels that had survived the Phantom Ships' bombardment, along with a dozen or so more that had arrived later, were simply sitting well back from Kelvin, doing nothing.

The Phantom Fleet, for its part, couldn't simply leave Kelvin and act independently—so they simply faced off with the patrol fleet in silence.

The change came after roughly two hours of this stalemate.

"Something coming out of phase drive! Significant numbers!"

An operator's voice rang through Kelvin's control room.

"Significant numbers—how many?"

"Stand by...! Targets have completed phase drive exit! Total count—two hundred and fifty-two! It's a Universal Force fleet!"

"What!?"

The mere name "Universal Force" sent an immediate ripple through the control room.

"...Impossible...!"

Gish let out a low groan.

He'd expected the Force to send a substantial number given that the Phantom Fleet had outmaneuvered them last time—but he hadn't imagined this many vessels arriving in such a short time.

But the reality was there. Nothing to be done about it now.

"Current Phantom Ship launch count!?"

"Sir! Approximately 140 ships have launched! More than half of the enemy's total!"

"—Good... We can fight."

"Against the Universal Force, sir!?"

The control room chief stared in disbelief, but Gish answered with complete confidence:

"Obviously. Even against the Force, our basic capabilities far exceed theirs. Split the fleet three ways! One group directly defends Kelvin, the other two attack! If the Force advances on us, the first group forms a wall and moves at minimum speed into the enemy while extending shields! The second group follows behind the shielded ships, uses them as cover, draws the Force in to a certain range, then opens fire! Any ships or attack craft that break through the wall, the defense group deals with! Anyway, the document retrieval—"

At that exact moment, the main display image abruptly changed.

Not all, but most of the displays showed the face of a single man. Unknown face—but the military uniform made his identity clear enough.

"Forced transmission from the Universal Force!"

A communications officer stated the obvious.

"—This is Admiral Christophe Madora, Universal Force F-100 Strike Cruiser Squadron. I address all personnel of Experimental Factory Kelvin. Cease resistance immediately and surrender! If you do not comply with our demands, we will destroy Kelvin entirely!"

"—Ha! Clumsy threat."

"—Actually—"

But Gish shook his head at the chief's murmur.

"It's not a threat. It's a tactic."

"—What do you mean?"

"There are many people in here who have nothing to do with the organization. The Force knows that. Which means they can't actually destroy this place. —But that forced transmission just played in the residential blocks too. If people who don't know what's going on heard that transmission—what happens?"

"—Then—panic—"

"Exactly. The Force intends to shake up the civilians inside and collapse us from within. —We can't afford to waste time. Current retrieval status?"

"Yes sir, currently at approximately thirty-five percent somehow."

"Not enough... Fine! Cancel the document retrieval operation and issue orders to begin withdrawal via Phantom Ships! —We're pulling out too! Issue withdrawal orders to all control and security rooms! Try not to let the civilians notice! Tell the fleet they are not to leave this sector until I give further orders! Once you've issued all instructions, you also withdraw!"

With that, Gish turned and strode out of the control room.

"All carrier aircraft ready to launch!"

"All ships at first-level combat readiness!"

Reports came in one after another to the bridge of the Universal Force light carrier Grey Condor.

The two-hundred-and-fifty-two ship Universal Force fleet, with the 600-meter class battleship-carrier Brahma as flagship under Admiral Madora's command, was proceeding through attack preparations against the fleet positioned around Kelvin.

"Signal from flagship Brahma! Commence Operation Code N-02 at zero-zero-zero-five! Time sync... five, four, three, two... time sync complete!"

"Reply. Grey Condor confirms."

Captain Clyde acknowledged.

—Operation Code N-02.

Cruisers lay down suppressing fire and close the distance; at a certain range, attack craft and destroyers surge forward, break through the enemy's defensive line, and strike the base. A penetration strategy.

The enemy's intercept strength was limited, and their numerical advantage at the moment was considerable. And since there was no way to know how many more forces would emerge from Kelvin, there was a pressing need to secure the facility as soon as possible.

This was, given current circumstances, a reasonable strategy but…

Captain Clyde's mind turned briefly with a flash of doubt.

He had faced this fleet before—in person.

That exceptional stealth capability, that speed, and that barrier output. By any analysis, they exceeded the equivalent class of spacecraft by a wide margin.

Those reports had certainly reached Admiral Madora too—but what if the admiral was underestimating that black fleet's capabilities?

If they went into battle with this strategy and it failed, it might be the Universal Force side that was destroyed.

—Don't overthink it. Not now—

Captain Clyde gave a small shake of his head.

Even if his concerns were well founded, he had no answer to what should be done differently. Honestly, he would have preferred to wait for more Universal Force units to arrive—but that could be hours away, and by then the number of enemies out of Kelvin would only have grown.

Time passed in tension and urgency while he wrestled briefly with his uncertainty—

And the operation began.

Leading cruisers and destroyers spread into a cross-shaped formation, open in all four directions—cruisers in the center of the cross, destroyers at the ends. When they closed to a suitable range, the destroyer groups at the tips would peel off and converge to encircle the enemy.

Behind the cruisers and destroyers, carrier groups and the flagship Brahma took position; further back, outside effective range, supply vessels waited.

In this formation, the fleet began advancing on Kelvin at combat speed.

"Enemy vessels increasing gradually. Total launch count currently 151. No sign of interceptor or fighter launches. Approximately 100 enemy vessels have formed a forward wall."

The navigator's voice flowed through the Grey Condor's bridge.

On the main display: the enormous gas planet dominating the view, and before it, the irregular silver sphere of Kelvin—and blocking the approach to Kelvin, the black fleet arrayed in a rectangular formation.

"All advance cruisers and destroyers have fire solutions ready. Distance to effective range, ten—"

At that moment—

As if to interrupt the navigator's words, the display image blazed with light for an instant.

BOOM!

An impact slammed into the Grey Condor.

Only then did Clyde register that the display's flash had been fire from the black fleet.

"Damage report!?"

Captain Clyde's voice rang out.

"...This ship—no damage! However..."

"However—what!?"

"...That volley just sunk... five cruisers, two carriers... and the flagship Brahma has been destroyed!"

"What!? The Brahma!? Impossible! We were still outside their range!"

Captain Clyde's voice came close to a scream.

But there was no longer any signal for the Brahma on radar.

The vibration that had just shaken the Grey Condor had probably been the explosion of a nearby sister ship.

The other vessels were in just as much panic.

The Universal Force fleet had the black fleet well within their own effective range, but the sudden loss of the flagship to fire from a range no one had accounted for had shaken them completely—not a single ship had yet opened fire.

—In that moment, the first to recover was the man who had faced this enemy's power firsthand: Captain Clyde.

"All fleet units! The enemy has long range, but our numbers still hold a decisive advantage! Press forward as per the strategy—getting inside their range is where we gain the advantage!"

If they started retreating now, the enemy would use that long range to pick them off at will. All that would do was increase pointless deaths.

Whether that finally snapped others out of it, cruisers and destroyers opened fire on the black fleet.

But—

Perhaps because they felt no obligation to follow the orders of a captain from a different unit—

A significant number of vessels ignored Clyde's call entirely, fired reverse thrusters, and began pulling back.

The Universal Force, which should have held the numerical advantage, found itself at a disadvantage from the very start.

Countless beams of light danced and criss-crossed the darkness.

The Universal Force fleet closed the gap with Wisp's Phantom Fleet, and eventually the destroyers surged forward.

Of course, ships that moved to the front became targets. The Phantom Fleet's fire converged on them, and ship after ship vanished in blossoms of light.

The Phantom Fleet, for its part, was not entirely unscathed.

As much as Lost Ship technology had been incorporated, the capability had not been fully replicated, and invincibility was certainly not an option. The armor, for instance, analysis had determined was simply impossible to reproduce with current technology—so the Phantom Ships' own hulls were made from conventional materials. Without shields raised, a direct hit would be fatal.

Some Phantom Ships firing from behind shielded vessels were unlucky enough to take hits from Universal Force fire and go down.

—But even so, the damage was overwhelmingly on the Universal Force side.

Above all, the enemy simply didn't show on radar.

Forced to rely on energy signatures for targeting and positioning, every missile impact and explosion disrupted everything. Between those destroyed and the significant numbers that had retreated, the forward cruisers and destroyers now numbered barely half what they'd started with.

And in this moment—

Confused by the unexpected disadvantage, a desperate idea occurred to one of the units that had pulled back.

Under the command of the 500-meter class carrier Silver Wolf, the operation proceeded.

A slender unit roughly 300 meters long, connected to the Silver Wolf's hull, was detached. Acting on instructions relayed by wire, it fired its thrusters and held stationary in the void.

What they called the Meteor Masher—its name implied it all—was originally a tool for breaking apart asteroids predicted to fall on inhabited planets and cause serious damage.

An energy cannon of approximately 40-meter bore—impressive as that sounds—it was in reality nothing more than a massive energy output unit with a token set of thrusters attached.

Obviously the Silver Wolf couldn't power it alone. Firing it required doing something quite extreme—connecting several energy transport vessels directly to the Meteor Masher with energy conduits.

Given its cheap and slipshod construction, it was naturally prone to malfunction—even fired at half power, it was common for something to break down the moment it discharged.

It was a product so close to defective that it barely qualified as functional—yet its destructive power was undeniably immense.

The deployment of the Meteor Masher and connection to the transport vessels went without a hitch, and the energy charge was completed shortly after.

The target was not, of course, the Phantom Fleet.

Moving to close range meant being destroyed, and firing at random had no chance of hitting anything.

The target was—Kelvin.

Calculate its position from energy signatures and orbital velocity. Fire one shot. If there's no surrender after that, fire again and again—announce that, and force a surrender.

That was the Silver Wolf captain's strategy.

"Kelvin orbit calculated! Targeting correction complete!"

"Meteor Masher, energy charge at 60%, ready to fire!"

Reports of preparation completion reached the Silver Wolf's bridge, and the captain gave a single decisive nod.

"Meteor Masher—fire!"

The captain's order was followed by the gunnery officer's repeat—

And a massive band of light was released into the void.

* * *

"What are they doing!? Are they insane!?"

On the Grey Condor's bridge, Captain Clyde cried out involuntarily at the sight on the display.

Just now.

A shot from the Meteor Masher, fired by a sister ship at the rear, had struck Kelvin directly.

If they were going to retreat in fear, fine.

But to use a Meteor Masher of all things to shell Kelvin—

"...There are civilians in there..."

He said it through clenched teeth.

BOOM!

A tremendous impact suddenly struck Kelvin.

"—What!?"

"What was that!?"

Kane and Milly, running through the corridor, staggered several steps involuntarily.

"Wait—did the Guardians open fire on us!?"

"That can't be—there are civilians in here! —Hold on! Let me check!"

Kane activated his wrist communicator and called Canal.

"—What are you two doing wandering around in there!? How long are you planning to take!?"

That frantic voice was the first thing out of her.

"Don't be like that. We finally found where the escape pods are. Should be able to get out fairly soon. Anyway, what's happening outside? Something just hit us pretty hard."

"This is no time to be casual! The Universal Force is here and going head-to-head with that fleet! They fired a large-caliber asteroid-breaking energy cannon at you! From outside it looks like chain explosions are going off all over the place!"

"WHAT!?"

Come to think of it, a faint rumbling vibration—like a tremor from somewhere deep—had been reaching them even now.

"And! Nightmare is right nearby! Heading straight this way!"

"...Didn't you say something similar about two hours ago...?"

"That was a different one! The first one seems to have left! This one is clearly coming straight here!"

"So either way—we need to get out of here right now, is what you're saying..."

"If you understand that then please move it!"

"Roger!"

With an enthusiastic reply, Kane ended the communication and started sprinting again with Milly.

* * *

Exactly what happened next—Gish probably never understood.

After leaving Control Room One, he'd ridden the moving walkway and headed toward Block 0-Z.

The residential blocks were probably in full panic, but the restricted transit routes were inaccessible to civilians.

He finished two or three tasks, and was just about to board one of the moored Phantom Ships—

At that exact moment, the Meteor Masher's direct hit arrived.

He probably didn't even have time to feel the last instant of agony.

The explosion set off by the dozens of combat-ready Phantom Ships punched through Kelvin's outer shell with casual ease, and the blasts spread and leaped to countless other locations.

And—

The resulting chain of explosions altered Kelvin's orbit.

Now—

The silver mass of Kelvin—nearly a hundred kilometers at its longest dimension—was falling toward the gas ocean of the planet Macfield.

GORUN NOVA

Falling.

The massive hull of Kelvin was plunging toward the planet Macfield.

"...It seems I had better go and help them...this is bad..."

Canal murmured in a bitter tone as she watched the image on her displays.

"Though...whether that thing will let us make a move without interfering is highly questionable..."

Canal's eyes had picked up the form of a single spaceship approaching their position. Four hundred and ten meters in length. A black hull shaped like a bird folding its wings into a dive. Six silver spheres drifting in orbit around the hull.

Nightmare's Lost Ship — Gorun Nova.

Of course, for Canal, this was an enemy she would eventually have to defeat. But if they fought now, it would almost certainly make it impossible to rescue Kane and Milly.

"...Hmm...I'm not really in the mood for this, but..."

Canal considered for a moment, then opened a comm channel toward Gorun Nova.

"...What do you want...Vorfeed...? We should have nothing to say to each other..."

A heavy voice reached Canal's ears.

"—I have a modest proposal," Canal said.

"Eventually, you and I are going to fight. But what if we settle things after we've dealt with the fleet of Lost Ship imitations — would that work for you?"

"...Don't make me laugh...Why should I...need to get cozy with you...?"

"It's not 'getting cozy' — it's a transaction.

If your only intent were to destroy me, you could have used the Ragudo Mezegis that was here a little while ago. And yet you personally came in its place aboard a heavy bombardment vessel.

—Which means your orders are to eliminate the counterfeit fleet — am I right?"

"...That is correct...But that doesn't mean I can simply overlook you standing right in front of me..."

"We can still settle things later. Of course we could settle them now too — but if while we're fighting, those copy ships scatter in every direction, you'll end up failing to carry out your orders, won't you?"

"......"

Paying no mind to the silence, Canal continued.

"I also have things to do before settling accounts with you.

If you dislike the phrase 'joining forces' — then think of it as each of us making use of the other's strength until we've each finished what we need to do.

How does that sound?"

"Word games."

Was it Canal's imagination, or did she sense the faintest trace of a wry smile in that voice?

"...Very well...I'll take that deal...But when our respective business is concluded, we will settle things without fail...Is that understood...?"

"—Understood—"

Canal answered, her tone somewhat bitter.

—And so.

The two Lost Ships began their advance.

Toward the airspace around Kelvin.

"Two unidentified vessels, rapid approach from relative bearing seven-zero dash three-two-zero!"

The radar operator's report rang out across the bridge of the Universal Force vessel Grey Condor.

"Unidentified?! Could they not be reinforcements?!"

The operator shook his head at Captain Clyde's question.

"Negative! No military identification signals! And at this speed... if anything, I'd say they're more likely allies of the black fleet!"

"...What..."

Captain Clyde let out a groan of despair.

The battle had taken a decisively unfavorable turn for the Universal Force.

The flagship had been sunk at the very start, and that alone had broken the fighting spirit of quite a number of units. They had pressed forward with the original plan despite that — but then the Silver Wolf, acting on its own initiative, had fired a Meteor Masher. The hit had knocked Kelvin off course and sent it into a fall.

If only that had broken the black fleet's will to fight, it would have been fine. But for some reason the black fleet pressed on with its attack regardless, as fierce as ever.

—Wasn't that their headquarters?—

Without a flagship to give orders and now having lost sight of Kelvin — which had been the main objective of their suppression mission — the Universal Force was in utter disarray. In that chaos, destroyers that had rushed out ahead and attack craft were being sunk by the black fleet one after another. Each unit began acting independently. Destroyers rashly charging forward were blasted apart under concentrated fire. A cruiser attempting to retreat and hurriedly trying to turn its bow was hit broadside, broken in two, and exploded.

In the midst of all this, the Grey Condor had begun its withdrawal the moment Kelvin started falling and had somehow managed to survive. By this point, the only light of hope left for the Universal Force was the reinforcements that should have been on their way — but —

"...Why...are their allies coming...?!"

As Clyde muttered in a half-daze, the radar operator's report came to him.

"The two unidentified vessels have changed course! One is heading toward the falling Kelvin, and the other has turned toward the black fleet!"

"Can you get the unidentified ships on the display?!"

"The one heading for the black fleet — I'll bring it up now!"

The image on the main display switched, and there, racing through the jet-black void, was the shape of a black spaceship.

A hull shaped like a bird folding its wings into a dive. Its entire form was encased in black organic armor reminiscent of a beetle, and somehow — the mechanism was unclear — several silver spheres drifted in orbit around the black hull.

It bore some resemblance to the black fleet that had sortied from Kelvin, but —

—No.

Clyde felt a decisive, visceral wrongness about that black ship. He couldn't have explained where or how it was different, but to him, it felt like a being in an entirely different class from the fleet that had come out of Kelvin.

At that moment.

The black ship on the display seemed to flicker for a split second. Simultaneously, dozens of blazing beams of light shot from various points on the hull — and then abruptly, impossibly, their trajectories bent in the void, converging into a single shaft of light that tore through the darkness!

"Fire from the unidentified vessel!"

A needless report. And then —

"Hit on one vessel of the fleet from Kelvin! Destroyed!"

"What?!"

The unexpected report made Clyde cry out involuntarily.

"—Could they be...on our side...?"

"—No—"

In response to someone's murmured question, Clyde groaned out an answer.

"I wouldn't call them allies...they do seem to be targeting the fleet that came out of Kelvin, but..."

"There are no pods! No escape pods!"

Milly clutched her head with both hands and screamed.

Inside Kelvin, plunging toward the planet below —

Kane and Milly had finally found the location where the escape pods should have been, and they stood there utterly at a loss.

Single pods with a capacity of around twenty people were each berthed in separate airlocks, and there were supposed to be five of them here.

But.

Every one of the airlocks was empty. A hollow expanse yawned where the pods should have been, without a trace.

"...Probably...someone else used them first and ran..." Kane said flatly.

"'Someone used them and ran' isn't the problem right now — what are we going to do?!" Milly demanded, half in tears.

Kane thought for a moment, then said:

"—Okay! First, we find an airlock with spacesuits! There's bound to be some around here."

"You're not about to say something crazy like going outside in just spacesuits, are you...?"

"Not a chance. We put on spacesuits, get into an airlock, keep the comm open, and get Canal to come and pick us up. When she arrives, we open the airlock and transfer over. That's the plan."

"Whoa! I see! Brilliant, Kane! I didn't know recklessness was your only talent!"

"Where exactly am I reckless?! Where?!"

"Everywhere, all the time, always! ...Anyway, never mind that..."

Her eyes darted around, scanning — and then her gaze stopped at a single point down the corridor.

"Isn't that — right there?"

"Let's check."

The two of them sprinted the short distance and stopped in front of a door.

"J-a-c-k-p-o-t," Kane said.

He pressed the switch on the wall and the door slid open. A dozen or so spacesuits hung along the left and right walls, and opposite them was a door leading to a pressurized chamber — a work-style airlock with the same layout as the one they'd used when they'd first boarded Kelvin.

Kane opened a channel to Canal on his left-wrist communicator and arranged for her to come pick them up, then pulled on a spacesuit over his clothes without cutting the channel. The two of them stepped into the pressure chamber.

"...Now we just wait..." Kane said in a carefree tone.

And at precisely that moment —

WHAM!

A shattering impact struck without warning.

—What the—?!

There wasn't even time to cry out. Both their bodies were thrown into the air.

They were being sucked out — along with the air inside, through a torn-open wall, out into space.

A large piece of debris from a ship destroyed in the battle had gouged Kelvin's outer hull, but Kane and Milly had no way of knowing that. With almost no idea of what was happening, Kane nevertheless managed to grab hold with his right hand at a structural beam jutting from the torn wall.

Right beside him, Milly was caught by the rush of air and swept along.

"—Milly!"

Kane cried out inside his helmet and reached out his left hand.

Their fingertips touched for a fleeting instant —

And then separated.

Milly's spacesuit drifted on into the darkness.

"Milly! Milly!"

Kane shouted her name —

And in that instant.

A wall appeared out of nowhere, filling his field of vision, and caught Milly's tumbling form.

"—It seems I managed to arrive just in time."

Canal's voice flowed through the communicator on his left wrist.

"...Made it...somehow..."

Kane breathed a sigh of relief and drifted toward the wall in front of him — the hull of the Swordbreaker.

"What's the situation?!"

Kane settled himself into the pilot's seat of the Swordbreaker and called to Canal.

"There's been no sign of any more counterfeit warships coming out of Kelvin since the explosion. Just a flood of escape pods."

"How's the Universal Force doing?"

Milly took her place in the gunner's seat shortly after Kane.

"To be blunt — they're getting absolutely demolished."

"...I think that's a bit too blunt..."

"But it's the counterfeit fleet that's going to be the one losing, in the end."

"Right. As long as we're here, they will."

Kane's voice was confident and defiant — but Canal answered in a heavy tone.

"...Rather, now that that thing has arrived here..."

"That thing?"

"Yes..."

Canal switched the image on the main display to the form of Gorun Nova racing through the void.

"—Is this the one?!"

Kane murmured. Canal gave a single nod.

"Nightmare's Lost Ship — heavy bombardment vessel Gorun Nova. To be perfectly honest, this is not an opponent I want to fight."

It was rare to hear Canal sound so hesitant. Milly looked at her with suspicion.

"You don't want to fight it...is there some reason for that?"

"It's a simple reason.

In terms of sheer offensive power — Gorun Nova is far above the Swordbreaker."

"...What...?!"

Kane and Milly both cried out at the same time.

"...W-wait though. Didn't you beat them — or seal them away — way back when?"

"I only 'sealed' them. And it cost me my full power to do it. I didn't defeat them in battle.

—But regardless, right now dealing with the copy fleet comes first. For the time being, we have a ceasefire arrangement with Gorun Nova. —You should watch carefully how it fights."

Hearing Canal's uncharacteristically uncertain tone, Kane and Milly looked at each other for a moment, then both gave a slow nod.

"—Either way, we've got no choice but to do it, right?"

Kane said, and gave Canal a wink.

"We'll be fine. We've got your back."

Milly added some groundless reassurance.

"In any case, we can't just sit here watching."

Kane seized the control lever firmly in both hands.

"Let's go!"

"Roger!"

Milly and Canal's voices came in unison.

The Swordbreaker's engines blazed with brilliant light. With a surge of acceleration they banked into position where they could target Wisp's black fleet.

Countless beams crisscrossed the darkness and explosions of all sizes flashed and bloomed. The Universal Force was nowhere near them now — every unit that had rushed forward had either retreated or been shot down.

The Universal Force was left only to keep its distance and continue its disorganized barrage around the edges of Wisp's fleet.

But Wisp's fleet, too, was in chaos.

The cause was a single black spaceship that was forcing its way straight through the heart of the fleet.

The hull of Gorun Nova — black and shimmer-like, surrounded by silver spheres — blazed, and in the next instant, a shaft of released light pierced right through one of Wisp's ships — barrier and all!

Another explosion bloomed in space.

But Wisp's fleet was not without resistance. They fired bolts of energy at Gorun Nova as it raced through the center of the battlefield. Several of those bolts traced courses that should have been direct hits. Gorun Nova didn't even attempt to dodge.

At the instant before the light would have struck —

The energy bolts bent off in random directions, as if deflected by something.

"...It's putting on quite a show..." Canal murmured softly.

But Kane and Milly could only stare at the display showing Gorun Nova's battle, dumbfounded.

"...What...is that...?" Kane managed to murmur after a while, finally coming back to himself.

"I did tell you, didn't I? Gorun Nova's offensive power is above the Swordbreaker's."

"Yeah, but...the power aside...did it just deflect incoming energy blasts?!"

He stared at the display showing Gorun Nova's form — something between a shimmer and a haze.

"It didn't deflect them. It warped them."

Canal switched the display and showed the recording of Gorun Nova's true appearance in memory — that bird-with-wings-folded form, surrounded by silver spheres.

"This is its true appearance," Canal said.

"It warps the space around the hull using those spheres, and uses that distortion as a kind of lens.

It fires all its energy cannons mounted across the hull simultaneously, then focuses the beams through the spatial lens and drives them into the target.

—Frankly speaking, if that hit us, even the Swordbreaker's barrier wouldn't last a second. Please be careful."

"...Can 'being careful' actually do anything against that...?"

Kane muttered darkly. Canal ignored him and continued.

"Of course, it can also be used in reverse — spread out — as an energy shower, so getting too close is also dangerous.

When it just deflected the enemy's energy bolts, that was the same principle — it bent the trajectories by distorting space.

The reason Gorun Nova appears as a shimmer right now is because it's constantly warping the surrounding space."

"...So after we deal with the counterfeit fleet, we've got to fight something like that..."

"...Now I understand why Canal said she doesn't want to fight it... Isn't it, honestly, invincible?"

Kane and Milly muttered glumly. Canal shook her head.

"It's not invincible. After each shot it fires, there's a brief lag before it can fire the next one, and adjusting the spatial lens also requires a fraction of a second.

—True, landing a direct hit with an energy bolt is nearly impossible — but using the Leap Railgun, it is possible to gouge out a section of it, space and all."

"But doesn't that mean...nothing except the Leap Railgun will work on it?"

"...Well...there is that school of thought..."

Canal answered Milly's question with a troubled expression.

"—If you've sealed it before, couldn't you just use the same trick to seal it again?"

"In theory it's not impossible — but if I do that now, I'll shut down too. Even if I seal Gorun Nova that way, there are still three more enemies remaining in Nightmare. Ones that, in various respects, are even more troublesome than Gorun Nova. I can't afford to retire while they're still out there."

"...Even more troublesome than that thing...?"

Milly's face tightened at Canal's words.

A brief silence fell over the Swordbreaker's cockpit.

"Right, enough of that!"

It was Kane's voice that broke the silence.

"Sitting here griping about it isn't going to change anything! First we knock out that fleet! We can think about Gorun Nova after that!

That's how it is — agreed?! Both of you!

Battle stations! Milly! I'm counting on you for the cannon fire!"

"Y-yes!"

Startled by his sudden call, Milly quickly snapped back and ran her fingers across the weapons control panel in the gunner's seat.

"Kane, Milly — save as many Leap Railgun rounds as you can for the fight with Gorun Nova!"

"Got it!"

"Roger!"

The Swordbreaker charged forward again.

Several of Wisp's ships finally took notice and opened fire.

"Sloppy!"

With a single shout, Kane evaded every one of the attacks without effort.

At the same time, Milly fired several consecutive beam cannon shots. They were ordinary beam cannons, but against the copy ships they were more than sufficient.

One of the ships that had attacked took a direct hit to its engine section and exploded. The others either managed to dodge or deployed their barriers in time — but the instant their barriers dropped, a second shot from the Swordbreaker pierced right through the hull.

"Let's keep the pace up! There are plenty more of them!"

Kane bellowed and drove the Swordbreaker straight into the heart of the fleet.

Wisp's Phantom Fleet was in complete disarray.

They had destroyed a Universal Guardian patrol vessel. They had even bloodied the nose of the Universal Force. All of that had gone well enough.

The Universal Force's reckless assault had critically damaged Kelvin and sent it tumbling down toward Macfield — that too could be accepted. The order had already been given to dispose of Kelvin to destroy the evidence. In that sense, one might even say the Universal Force had saved them the trouble.

But then.

Out of nowhere, two unknown ships had appeared and opened fire without warning — and were sinking the supposedly invincible Phantom Ships with appalling ease.

They had launched their own attack on what was, after all, just one vessel — but their energy blasts did absolutely nothing.

And then another ship had shown up, using utterly outclassed maneuverability and pinpoint accuracy to sink one Phantom Ship after another.

Their opponents were a mere two vessels — and yet, overconfident from their earlier routing of the Universal Force, and blinded by pride, the Phantom Fleet's losses had piled up before they knew it, and the better part of their number had been sent to the bottom in no time at all.

There was no longer any coherent fleet discipline. Fire aimed at the passing enemy ships went wide, or was deflected, and in some cases actually struck friendly Phantom Ships.

No doubt some among them wanted nothing more than to flee — but they were bound by the order Gish had given: do not leave this sector under any circumstances until further orders arrive. And they all knew perfectly well what fate awaited those who defied orders from above in this organization.

And they did not know that Gish was already dead.

Waiting for orders that would never come, they fought on without end.

"The Universal Force has begun to move! They're advancing on our position!"

"Whattt?!"

Without letting up on the control levers, Kane shouted at Canal's report.

The Swordbreaker and Gorun Nova's intervention had significantly thinned the numbers of Wisp's Phantom Ships. They had started at a hundred fifty or sixty, but by now that number had been cut by roughly half.

The Universal Force had presumably judged that now — with the Phantom Ships reduced — was their chance. Not all units advanced, but most of them came charging in.

However, this "reinforcement" was, frankly speaking, nothing but an obstacle to Kane and his crew. In the current situation, all they needed to do was attack everything in sight — but once the Universal Force mixed into the fighting, the problems of identification and friendly fire arose.

On top of that, while Kane and his crew would hesitate to fire on the Universal Force's ships, Gorun Nova certainly would not.

"Damn opportunists!

Canal — open a channel to the Universal Force! Show our ship's registry and tell them 'that black ship is not an ally — stay back, or you'll risk getting caught in its fire'!"

"Though I doubt they'll listen, even if we say so... The Universal Force has its pride..."

True enough — already sufficiently humiliated by needing two ships to clean up a battle they'd been losing, it was hardly likely they'd simply comply after being told by those same two ships to stay out of danger.

"But we can't just say nothing, can we?!"

"—Understood. In that case, I'll send out a one-way broadcast to the Universal Force."

Canal sent the message without requiring Kane or Milly to be distracted from the fighting.

But —

Just as Canal had predicted, the Universal Force's fleet entirely ignored the communication and pressed forward.

And then the first casualty happened.

One of the Phantom Ships had been taking fire from the Universal Force and had deployed its barrier — when Gorun Nova's cannon struck.

The focused energy bolt pierced the barrier and gouged the side of the hull. Whether the aim was slightly off or not, the single hit wasn't enough to vaporize it outright.

Part of the hull exploded, and the shockwave sent the barrier-less Phantom Ship tumbling toward the Universal Force's fleet.

The Universal Force scrambled to evade before being caught in the explosion.

And then Gorun Nova's second shot came.

The energy bolt this time struck squarely through the Phantom Ship's engine section.

An explosion followed — engulfing a nearby Universal Force cruiser completely.

When one of the Universal Force's ships sent a warning to Gorun Nova, it was of course ignored. Whenever a Phantom Ship moved to use a Universal Force vessel as a shield, Gorun Nova fired without hesitation through the Universal Force ship and the Phantom Ship alike.

It did not take the Universal Force long to classify Gorun Nova as an enemy.

The difficult position this created was Kane's crew's problem. Some elements of the Universal Force — not content with treating Gorun Nova as an enemy — also, for some reason, began treating Kane and his crew as enemies and opening fire on them.

But Kane and his crew couldn't simply sink them in return.

As a result, the Swordbreaker was forced into the deeply inconvenient position of weaving through the Universal Force's fire while attacking the Phantom Ships at the same time.

—As the battle wore on, the chaos only deepened.

A shaft of light from Gorun Nova pierced the hull of another Phantom Ship, and it scattered its explosion across the void.

—The last one.

Even to the most chaotic of battles, the hour of its end eventually draws near.

Every last Phantom Ship that had sortied from Kelvin had been sunk — by the Swordbreaker, by Gorun Nova, and by the Universal Force.

Of course, some among the Phantom Fleet had realized the situation was hopeless and attempted to flee. Some had even declared surrender.

But Gorun Nova permitted none of it.

For ships that had dropped their barriers, turned their backs, and fired their engines. For ships that had declared surrender and dropped their barriers.

Merciless fire rained down, reducing them one after another to drifting debris. There were even cases where Universal Force ships that attempted to intervene and protect those who had surrendered were destroyed along with them.

—From the beginning, the orders given to Gorun Nova had been to completely annihilate every counterfeit of a Lost Ship.

And when the last Phantom Ship was destroyed, what remained in the battlefield were the Universal Force, now reduced to around a hundred vessels, the Swordbreaker — and Gorun Nova.

The Swordbreaker and Gorun Nova came to face each other at some distance from the Universal Force's fleet.

"...It seems the time for settling things has come..." Canal murmured to herself in the Swordbreaker's cockpit.

—But.

"...Not yet..."

Gorun Nova's voice came through the cockpit.

"...Not yet...?"

Milly frowned.

There shouldn't be a single Phantom Ship remaining in this sector...

"...Not yet...it is not complete..."

And with that, Gorun Nova altered course.

Toward Kelvin, still sinking into Macfield's sea of gas.

"—Gorun Nova intends to finish off Kelvin completely."

"Then let's go too."

Milly and Canal frowned at Kane's words.

"Go...go and do what? Help destroy Kelvin?"

"...Well, not exactly.

But a showdown inside a sea of gas — that sounds like it could be interesting."

"...What sort of logic is that..."

"Besides, the idea of facing the Universal Force's fleet while Gorun Nova wanders off doesn't sit great with me.

Obviously they'd want to know everything — who we are, what we're doing with a ship like this.

And besides, we can't fight Gorun Nova while worrying about the Universal Force getting caught in the crossfire, can we."

"Well, that is true.

—By the way, Kane, the Universal Force is hailing us."

"...Yeah, figured as much...

Tell them something like: 'We have no time to explain. We are pursuing the black vessel. Please recover the escape pods from Kelvin survivors.' Whatever. They won't like it — but if they say anything, ignore it and go anyway."

"...As always...you're not thinking ahead at all...

Our ship's registry was already exposed when I sent them the warning about Gorun Nova. They're going to be on our case about this for a while."

"You idiot. You can't live in the present if you're always worried about the future!"

"......"

Silence from Canal and Milly.

Canal sighed with a wry smile.

"...Understood. That's how it will be, then."

"Right! Now that that's settled, we go after Gorun Nova! Canal, handle the communication!"

And the Swordbreaker swung around, in pursuit of Gorun Nova.

With each burst of light, some part of Kelvin caught fire and exploded. While it kept up its barrage, Goru nnova had arrived at the rift that the Universal Force's Meteor Masher had blown open.

It sent out a small scouting unit to look inside. In the vast space within, countless black spaceships drifted — some anchored, some simply floating.

"...Hmm..."

Sensor sweeps confirmed what appeared to be no ships still in motion.

The crew members who had been in this section when the Meteor Masher struck directly — those who had not yet boarded their ships — were almost certainly all dead. Burned alive, or perhaps sucked out into space with the air.

Of course, there may have been those who had already boarded in time and escaped the immediate danger. But they had likely emerged from Kelvin, joined the battle line — and been destroyed there.

Indeed, even in the midst of the earlier battle, Gorun Nova had kept watch on Kelvin. During that time, two copy ships had emerged through this very rift, and Gorun Nova had sunk them both.

It seemed unlikely that anyone would try to start up a ship in here now. If so, there would have been no need to come all the way here — one could simply leave this section to sink in Macfield's gravity.

But Gorun Nova was not satisfied with that.

Pulling back to a short distance from the rift, adjusting the spatial lens that surrounded it —

—The next moment. Nearly a hundred shafts of light were driven through the gap in the hull into Kelvin's interior.

Simultaneously, Gorun Nova pulled out of position.

And then — the explosion.

The vast space laboratory factory of the Wilkins Corporation — of Wisp — blew columns of fire out through the cracks in its outer hull.

With the rising columns of flame at its back, Gorun Nova temporarily released its surrounding spatial lens and made a slow, unhurried turn.

Toward the Swordbreaker, which had just arrived.

The two ships faced each other again.

Beside the sinking Kelvin, inside Macfield's sea of gas.

"...Our business here is mostly finished..."

With its bow sensor eye fixed on the one that had once sealed them away, Gorun Nova sent a communication to the Swordbreaker.

"—Shall we begin—"

Those words were the declaration of war.

At the same instant, Gorun Nova's massive hull seemed to flicker and blur.

"Tch!"

With a single click of his tongue, Kane wrenched the control levers hard. Almost simultaneously with the rapid attitude change, Gorun Nova's focused beam tore through the space the Swordbreaker had occupied just a fraction of a second before.

"Milly! Can you target the silver spheres?! If we can smash even one of those, we'd make quick work of this!"

"I'll try!"

Milly worked the control panel and brought the Psy-Blaster's sights to bear on the silver spheres surrounding Gorun Nova.

The Swordbreaker fired the Psy-Blaster in rapid succession — but Gorun Nova didn't even bother to dodge. The first shot had its trajectory bent by the spatial lens and veered off in the wrong direction — but the second appeared to score a direct hit on one of the silver spheres.

But in that instant, the light wrapped around the sphere and was deflected in a random direction.

It seemed hitting the spheres directly was just as difficult.

"No good?!"

"Not yet!"

Milly fired the Psy-Blaster again in a rapid volley — and hidden among those shots, she fired a single Leap Railgun round.

The projectile would detonate at a preset distance, scattering miniature spatial transfer devices in all directions. When those devices activated, anything within a fifty-meter radius would be gouged out of existence along with the space it occupied. It wouldn't matter how Gorun Nova curved the space around its hull.

But —

Gorun Nova — which had not bothered to dodge anything until now — suddenly changed course.

The Leap Railgun round carved an empty gouge through Macfield's gas clouds.

"It read us?!"

Milly called out in surprise.

"Then hit it with nothing but the Leap Railgun!"

"That's all we've got left!"

The Leap Railgun fired again — and again Gorun Nova evaded, firing back with a focused beam.

The Swordbreaker dodged that easily enough — but this time, a spread of dozens of energy bursts came raining down on them!

Each individual shot had far less power than the focused beam, but without barriers, taking a hit from that would certainly not be pleasant.

—Deploy Psy-Barrier—

The words rose to Kane's throat and he barely swallowed them back.

Deploying the barrier would freeze their movement for just an instant — and if Gorun Nova chose that moment to fire its focused beam, it would be over.

"What?!"

Even he wasn't entirely sure how he managed it — but through what could only be described as a miracle of half-instinctive piloting, he evaded every single burst.

Even so, this couldn't be repeated indefinitely. Kane skimmed the Swordbreaker along Kelvin's surface, using the massive hull as a shield against the spread fire.

Gorun Nova's focused beams tore effortlessly through Kelvin's outer hull to threaten the Swordbreaker.

By the narrowest of margins, the Swordbreaker slipped away from the immense energy shaft. True, the outer hull covering Kelvin's bulk was useless as a shield against those focused beams — but it should serve against the spread fire.

Gorun Nova moved in to close the distance, but the Swordbreaker had a significant speed advantage.

All the while, Milly continued to fire Leap Railgun shots — and Gorun Nova continued to dodge every last one.

The two ships skimmed along Kelvin's surface, maintaining distance and exchanging fire. The Leap Railgun blinked sections of the laboratory hull out of existence; the focused beams gouged through others.

One clean hit from either side would end it — but neither had landed yet.

And then —

"Milly! Leap Railgun rounds are running low!"

Canal's voice rang out.

"WHAT?!"

In her shock, Milly's involuntary shot detonated somewhere well clear of Gorun Nova.

"Running low...?! How many are left?!"

"Five — no, four after that last one!"

"You could've told us a little sooner! Something that important!

Can't we do something, Canal?!"

"We absolutely cannot!"

The Leap Railgun's spatial-transfer rounds were impossible to manufacture with current human technology. The ones they used were made by Canal, who had repurposed the Swordbreaker's self-repair system — and the production rate was accordingly abysmal.

Even running at full capacity, they might produce one round per hour if they were lucky.

Needless to say, in the current situation there was no time to wait for more.

"Right! It's time to throw the dice!"

Having heard the two of them, Kane made his turn.

Soon, the Swordbreaker arrived at the rift that the Universal Force's Meteor Masher had blown open. The spread-fire that Gorun Nova had fired in had apparently set off the copy fleet inside, but from the outside, those explosions seemed to have already died down.

"We're going in!"

Kane pointed the bow toward the rift.

"Hold on, Kane! If we do that we'll be cornered!"

Milly protested.

True — there had been a quite vast space inside Kelvin. But still too cramped for a spaceship to maneuver properly. That meant the Swordbreaker couldn't make full use of its superior mobility against Gorun Nova.

But Kane drove inside Kelvin regardless.

"What choice do we have?! Gorun Nova will come to finish us off at the rift — when it does, we hit it with the Leap Railgun! One shot, winner takes all!"

"...Another one of your crazy ideas..."

"—No good?"

"—Of course I'm in—"

Milly broke into a defiant grin.

"Could be interesting. Fine. I'll play along."

"Now we're talking! Let's go!"

Kane pointed the Swordbreaker's bow toward the rift.

—Inside Kelvin — in what had once been known as the 0-Z section — now only the color of death remained.

The wreckage of spaceships drifted all around. Those still intact were scorched across their hulls from the explosions.

The occasional blue-white flicker was probably some component short-circuiting somewhere.

Sinking into the darkness, Kane and his crew waited.

For the moment Gorun Nova would appear at the rift outside.

A faint sheen of sweat gathered on Kane's brow as he stared at the display.

Milly's finger — resting on the Leap Railgun's fire key, aim and settings already locked — trembled slightly.

And then —

It came without warning.

A white light pierced through Kelvin's outer hull — and struck down somewhere quite far from the Swordbreaker!

BANG!

A shockwave slammed into the Swordbreaker.

Debris from ships displaced by the blast had struck them.

"It seems it decided to use an area bombardment approach..."

"That THING! It's going for a methodical carpet bomb instead of one-on-one! What happened to elegance and craft!"

Kane complained in terms that defied comprehension.

"More importantly, what do we DO?! If we move out carelessly we'll get hit in one shot!"

Even as Milly spoke, another beam struck somewhere distant.

Gorun Nova was probably firing on rough estimates — but if this kept up, eventually a direct hit was inevitable.

"Okay! Aim the Leap Railgun at the ceiling and set it to fire in sequence, detonating to open a hole, then we fly out through it!"

"To blow a hole that size — we'll need three rounds."

"Which leaves us one?!

—Doesn't matter, do it!"

Canal gave her estimate and Kane answered without hesitation, swinging the Swordbreaker's bow toward the ceiling.

"Milly! Hand control of the Leap Railgun to Canal for now! Canal — settings and fire are yours!

What's the time lag between the first hole and the third round opening the gap?"

"Approximately zero-point-seven seconds."

Even while configuring the targeting, Canal answered without hesitation.

"Zero-point-seven...whether Gorun Nova can get a shot off during that window is the question."

—Once again a shot from Gorun Nova punched through somewhere distant.

"Forget it, we do it anyway! Canal — targeting set?!"

"Complete. Just waiting for the GO signal."

"Right!"

Kane held a beat of silence —

"Now!"

His voice was the signal — the Swordbreaker fired the Leap Railgun.

—It happened simultaneously.

The first Leap Railgun round blew open a hole in Kelvin's wall — and the wall just beside it was pierced by Gorun Nova's focused beam — at exactly the same instant.

The Swordbreaker fired its engines to full and burst out into space through the Leap Railgun's hole, slipping past Gorun Nova's focused beam by a hair's breadth!

They barely evaded the next focused beam that came immediately after and pulled back to put some distance between them.

—But the Leap Railgun was down to its last round.

"...Are we seriously going to have to stake everything on this one shot...?"

Milly murmured in a voice of bleak despair.

"—Wait, hold on.

Canal — do you have any idea what its weak points are?!"

"If I did, I'd have told you already. I only have broad-strokes data on it."

"...Damn."

Kane clicked his tongue and glared at the image on the display — Gorun Nova's form, somewhere between a shimmer and a haze.

Gorun Nova was facing them broadside, still firing at intervals.

"...Hm...?"

In that moment, a certain question flickered through Kane's mind.

—Or maybe — just maybe —

"Canal — is Gorun Nova deploying any external sensor units separate from its hull?"

"There's no indication of that — ah!"

"That's what I thought!

Milly! Hit it with nothing but the Psy-Blaster! Lay down a random attack, then we'll cut across its bow — aim for its eye!"

Milly frowned for a split second at Kane's words —

"—Got it! I understand! I'll try!"

She answered and opened up with the Psy-Blaster in rapid succession. Every single shot was bent by the spatial lens around Gorun Nova and deflected in random directions.

The Swordbreaker kept up the barrage as it traced an erratic, zigzagging path and closed the distance toward Gorun Nova.

—At this point, Gorun Nova was nearly certain of victory.

The Swordbreaker — to it, Vorfeed — had switched its attack from the Leap Railgun to the Psy-Blaster. That almost certainly meant the Leap Railgun rounds were either exhausted or nearly so.

But they were closing in — which meant there was probably still at least one round remaining.

Its opponent was likely planning to fire the Leap Railgun from such close range that evasion would be impossible — that was how Gorun Nova read the move.

—True, the Swordbreaker had the edge in maneuverability. But given the nature of the Leap Railgun, once you slipped outside its effective range, that was the end of it.

The plan would be to watch only for the Leap Railgun mount, and upon any sign of it firing, initiate evasion — and it should be possible to avoid.

After that, all that remained was to wait for the Leap Railgun's ammunition to run dry, and then close in for the kill.

The one concern was the possibility of the opponent fleeing.

But caution was still required. The priority now was to focus entirely on watching for the Leap Railgun.

Vorfeed was evading Gorun Nova's fire and continuing its ineffectual attacks as it bore down straight ahead.

—The Leap Railgun mount was still not moving.

The distance between them was steadily narrowing.

Vorfeed adjusted its trajectory under continued fire, falling onto a course that would take it straight across Gorun Nova's bow.

—Is it coming now?!

The Psy-Blaster fire was unchanged. The Leap Railgun mount still showed no movement.

—Could they intend simply to break off this pass and flee? Or is the first pass a feint — ?

The instant that thought crossed Gorun Nova's mind.

Its field of vision turned white.

"Now! Milly!"

Kane roared and dragged the control lever hard over.

The Swordbreaker changed trajectory while continuing its barrage and swung onto a course straight across Gorun Nova's bow.

Gorun Nova, still not attempting to evade, returned intermittent fire.

And then — the instant the Swordbreaker passed directly in front of Gorun Nova's bow —

"Now!"

Milly fired a single Psy-Blaster cannon!

—In the fraction of a second she depressed the trigger, Milly thought she glimpsed, beyond the scope's reticle, Gorun Nova's red sensor eye staring back at her.

And then —

"AAAAAAGH?!"

Gorun Nova's scream resonated directly in Kane's and Milly's heads.

That black hull shimmered and its true form appeared — its bow section, including the sensor eye, destroyed.

—Because the space around it was lensed, the shape of Gorun Nova appeared to shimmer and blur from outside. It followed that from inside, the view outward should have been equally obscured. Yet Gorun Nova had no separate sensor unit deployed — and had somehow always tracked the Swordbreaker's exact position.

—Which meant there had to be some section of the spatial lens that wasn't being maintained, through which it was confirming their location. That had been Kane's deduction.

And might that section not be the bow sensor eye?

He had exploited Gorun Nova's near-total reliance on its spatial lens and complete disregard for Psy-Blaster attacks — waiting until the Swordbreaker swept directly across Gorun Nova's bow so Milly could fire the Psy-Blaster straight into the unshielded sensor eye.

Because the angle had been slightly off from dead-ahead, the shot hadn't punched through Gorun Nova's hull — it had merely destroyed the bow section.

"Milly! Leap Railgun!"

"I know!"

Without a moment's pause after Gorun Nova appeared —

Before Gorun Nova could restart its spatial lens —

The last Leap Railgun round destroyed one of the silver spheres and gouged out a section of Gorun Nova's hull!

But Gorun Nova was still alive. Throwing up a partial spatial lens, it attacked with whatever gun mounts still functioned.

"...Still…I'm still not done!"

"Oh yes you are!"

Kane called back to the voice in his head as he evaded Gorun Nova's fire.

"Canal! Plasma Blast!"

"Roger!"

Six amplification chips shot out and attached themselves to points on the hull at the vertices of a regular hexagon.

The moment the Swordbreaker's deployed Psy-Barrier touched them, they blazed with blue-white light.

"Plasma Blast — fire!"

Dozens of plasma arms extended from the barrier — reaching for Gorun Nova!

"I SAID I’M NOT DONE!"

The remaining five spheres abruptly changed trajectory and seized the reaching plasma arms!

"What—?!"

All of them cried out in shock.

But —

"—I'll say it one more time: it's over!"

Kane vented a portion of the barrier particles and drove the Swordbreaker straight at Gorun Nova — Plasma Blast still blazing!

"Are you sane?! Vorfeed?!"

"Talk to my pilot!"

Even Canal let out an involuntary scream.

"Kane! This is insane!"

"I know! But so is Gorun Nova!"

"Even so, the output levels—!"

"Let me tell you something, Canal — in a fight to the death, who wins and who loses comes down to who can be more reckless than the other!"

"......"

"Let's go! Gorun Nova!"

"OOOOOOOH!"

As if in answer to Kane's words, Gorun Nova's voice thundered through the void.

The Swordbreaker drove forward without hesitation — straight into Gorun Nova!

SCREECH!

With a sound like tearing metal, the moment the Swordbreaker's Psy-Barrier made contact, the load exceeded their limits — and the five spheres Gorun Nova was commanding exploded!

With nothing left to block them, the plasma arms wrapped themselves around Gorun Nova's hull!

The Swordbreaker shot past, clear of the explosion.

Behind them, a blaze of light erupted.

ROAAAAARRR—

With a thin dying wail trailing off into nothing, Gorun Nova was gone from the universe.

...Whew...

The silence that had fallen over the Swordbreaker's cockpit was broken by Kane's long sigh of relief.

"...I don't even know where to begin..."

Canal shook her head slowly, her expression one of utter resignation.

"...Targeting Gorun Nova's sensor eye at that relative speed, driving straight into the enemy after that...and you did both."

"Impressed?"

"Very much so. In a variety of ways.

...Well...we did win, so I suppose it's fine...

Milly is completely frozen solid, by the way."

"Hm?"

Kane looked over to see Milly in the gunner's seat, eyes fixed on the main display, completely immobile.

"...Hey. Milly? You okay?"

At Kane's voice, she turned her head with a creak — like it needed oiling — and stared at him blankly for a moment, then murmured:

"...Hazard pay...please make sure it's in the contract..."

"Relax. When the job fee comes in, I'll make sure you get a bonus."

"—Speaking of which, Kane..."

Canal said.

"What do we do...about the Universal Force?"

Beyond the sea of gas that was Macfield, the Universal Force's fleet would still be out there. Which meant they'd inevitably be subjected to a very thorough round of questions.

"Don't worry. I've already decided."

"...Then it will be...?"

Canal asked with a wry smile.

Kane gave her a mischievous wink.

"We go through the sea of gas and surface somewhere the fleet can't see us. Then run like hell."

"Understood."

—And some time after that.

The Swordbreaker burst out from the sea of gas, emerging from the far side of the planet Macfield.

EPILOGUE

"—The Universal Force hasn't said a word to us," Canal remarked casually in the Swordbreaker's cockpit. It was about a week after the battle.

They had knocked down Phantom Ships one after another in full view of the Universal Force fleet, vanished without explaining themselves, and escaped entirely. On top of that, their ship's registry had been clearly provided to the Force.

By all rights, immediate inquiries and intensive questioning should have followed. And yet, a full week had passed without a single word.

This wasn't good luck.

In fact, the past several days of news had been full of reports about the Wilkins Corporation — nominal owner of Kelvin — being subjected to thorough investigation, links to the organization being confirmed, and the investigation reaching all the way to major figures within the organization.

That the Swordbreaker alone hadn't even received a single inquiry made no sense however you looked at it.

"—Pressure, you think? Someone putting the squeeze on them?"

It was Milly, slumped back in the gunner's seat and staring vaguely at nothing, who said it.

"—Pressure — from whom?"

"Nightmare, obviously."

"...?!"

Canal was momentarily speechless at how casually Milly had said it.

"There are apparently quite a few people in high military positions and such who have connections to that organization behind the scenes.

If we ended up getting investigated by the military, it would come out that this ship is a Lost Ship, wouldn't it? And then naturally the military would start researching the technology.

Which means — next thing you know, the military would be building their own fleet, just like Wisp's counterfeit fleet. A fleet that would be inconvenient for them.

So they didn't want that to happen, and they pressured the military through back channels to leave us alone.

That's my guess."

"...Makes sense..."

"—Whatever the Universal Force may or may not say, though—" Kane cut in, in a disgruntled tone.

"I'm not thrilled that the rest of our fee still hasn't come in."

"Still?!"

Milly sat bolt upright, her voice suddenly urgent.

"Then what about the bonus?!"

"Relax.

—The job fee. I'm going to invoice Tania right now.

Canal, get Tania Sticky on the line."

"Understood."

She fell silent for a moment —

"...This is strange..."

She murmured with a slight frown.

"What is it?"

"...Surely not...'this number is no longer in service'...?"

"Exactly what Milly feared."

"What?! You already confirmed her identity! You, Canal!"

"I did. I cross-checked against the photo on file with the Universal Guardian database."

"But she was a fake..."

Kane said.

"Which means the Tania Sticky who brought us this job was either someone using a photo pulled from the Universal Guardian database and matching it with a lookalike — or they created a convincing CG based on the photo.

But if it were just ordinary CG, Canal would have seen through it in a heartbeat. Which would mean—"

"That's not necessarily the case," Canal said.

"True, CG produced by ordinary machines would be trivial for me to detect.

—But if the CG had been created by something of my own level — the situation is different."

"—Something of your own level—"

"...Nightmare...?"

"—Wait?! That means—!"

Milly's face went rigid.

"Yeah...that's what it means.

If that's the case — then we won in the end, but this time we were dancing in the palm of Nightmare's hand the whole time..."

"...No, wait, that's not..."

Her face still stiff, she said:

"If that's true, then obviously the rest of the job fee isn't coming...

Which means the bonus isn't coming either?! Or the hazard pay?!"

"Nothing. Not a single credit."

"...waaah...waaaaah...waaaah..."

And at Kane's words, Milly wept from the bottom of her heart.

...ooo...oooooooooo...

The sound swirling through the darkened room seemed particularly loud today.

"—That concludes today's report."

The man in the dark suit lowered the document in his hand and added:

"—Oh, and one more thing.

There was one individual at the peripheral level who turned out to be a Wisp spy. As per your instructions, we've taken them alive."

—If there is a person who needs to be eliminated, bring one of them — anyone will do — Bring them to me, alive—

He had received that peculiar order from the old man standing before him — Albert Van Stargazer — some days prior.

The spy who had infiltrated the lower ranks of Nightmare had shown suspicious movements in recent days, no doubt influenced by the spread of the Universal Guardian's investigation close to the core of Wisp — and had ultimately given themselves away.

"—Bring them here."

"Understood."

The man in the dark suit stepped out of the room, and after a moment returned with three men.

One was the Wisp spy. Two men flanked that individual, gripping them tightly from both sides.

All of them — even the captured spy — seemed to be oppressed by the room's atmosphere, and stood in silence, beads of sweat forming on their foreheads.

The old man slowly raised his eyes and looked at the Wisp spy.

"Let me show you something interesting."

He slowly drew his right hand out from under his cloak.

From his fingers hung —

A pendant.

At the end of a fine silver chain, catching the faint light of the room — a red-black jewel, glowing with a dull light.

"Can you believe it? Something like this can kill a person."

"...N-no chance...! You can't kill anyone with something like that...!"

The man said, his voice shaking.

He was right — at first glance, it hardly seemed suited as a weapon. Even if you tried to wrap the chain around someone's throat, the delicate chain would break before the person stopped breathing.

"You know, I'm sure.

That there was once a civilization in this galaxy."

"...So...what of it...?"

Remnants of the old civilization had been discovered in many locations. Anyone knew that much. And it was widely understood that this civilization had apparently possessed technology far beyond that of current humanity.

"This is one of the artifacts left behind by that civilization — a type of assassination tool.

Touch this red sphere to someone's forehead — just that alone is enough to kill them."

"Liar!"

The man shouted and struggled.

"Whether I'm lying or not — I'm about to demonstrate."

With that, Stargazer began to walk slowly toward the man.

"Stay back! Stay away!

—It's a lie — a lie! Something like that can't kill anyone! Stay away!"

"If you believe it's a lie, you have no reason to be afraid."

Stargazer stopped in front of the man and raised the pendant to forehead height.

"It's a lie!"

The right hand holding the pendant extended slowly.

"A lie—"

The hanging red sphere touched lightly against the man's forehead.

At that instant.

The man's head dropped forward — suddenly, lifelessly.

Low, startled gasps escaped from the dark-suited men who had been holding him.

After all, this was Stargazer acting — it was hard to imagine him fumbling something like this — but even knowing that, seeing it happen with their own eyes still drew involuntary sounds of shock.

"...He's dead...confirmed..."

One of the two men checked the pulse of the man whose head had fallen, and said so.

"Take him away."

At Stargazer's word, both men dragged the spy's corpse out of the room.

Left behind were only Stargazer and the man in the dark suit, who stood in stunned silence.

"...Remarkable...what is happening with it...?"

The dark-suited man asked, unable to help himself.

Stargazer extended the pendant toward him.

"If you want it, you may have it. It's nothing but an ordinary pendant."

"...What...? But...?"

He took it nervously and examined it — and sure enough, as the old man had said, it was nothing but a completely unremarkable pendant.

The red sphere at the end was nothing but a glass bead, and on the clasp there were even letters engraved in what appeared to be a manufacturer's initials.

Whatever it looked like, it most certainly did not look like an artifact of a prior civilization.

You could pick it up at any toy shop or cheap accessory stall for a few credits.

And yet —

This pendant, with just a gentle touch to the forehead, had killed a man.

"...How...? What does it mean...?"

"The pendant itself has no power," Stargazer said.

"But you believed it did. All of you.

That belief killed the man."

"...A kind of self-suggestion...?"

"Not quite.

You cannot kill a person like that through mere self-suggestion.

If the power of the human spirit can be physically applied, then the spirit itself has power. The pendant is simply a 'key.' By making you all believe to a certain degree that it has power, it gathers force through the key as a medium.

The gathered power killed that man."

"...Is that possible?! Something like that?!"

The dark-suited man's voice was half-disbelieving.

Technology to gather spiritual power was something current humanity simply didn't have.

If what Stargazer said was true — it would mean one could draw a magic circle, gather the mental power of those who believed in it, and use it to kill even those who did not believe. That would be nothing short of sorcery — not science at all.

But Stargazer said flatly:

"I have just demonstrated it."

The man had no words left.

"The experiment is complete. You may go."

At Stargazer's word, the dark-suited man left the room with a bow.

After a time —

"Your power has recovered, it seems."

Stargazer said quietly.

In the empty room. To no one.

"...It is not perfect. But it is power sufficient to bring ruin.

Besides — fear compounds."

That voice, as though space itself were trembling, had become even more distinct than before.

"Then—"

"Indeed...once again the time has come...for me to spread darkness across the galaxy..."

—And so — the nightmare begins...

A COMPLETELY INCOHERENT AFTERWORD

(Please store this away somewhere the physically-allergic cannot find it.)

The new year has come, and spring has arrived! The cherry blossoms are blooming and my manuscript was late! My apologies! The author was entirely at fault!

—So, this is Kanzaka.

Lost Universe has now reached its third volume — right in the middle of the story.

In the afterword of volume two, I wrote something about presenting a hand-signed color illustration to the first person to overturn the theory of special relativity — but no one has managed it yet. (Well of course not. These things aren't so easily overturned.)

Even so, since leaving it entirely to other people would be irresponsible in its own way, the author has actually gone out and bought a book titled something like "Special Relativity for Cats" — one of those friendly introductions — and tried reading it.

Still don't understand it.

The more I poke at it, the more completely incomprehensible it gets — which is, I think, rather charming.

At first glance, for example, if you try plugging the speed of light c itself into the equation that expresses the "length contraction" part of why "nothing can exceed the speed of light," you get the result that a beam or laser of light has zero length — meaning light is unobservable. "Wait, that can't be right. Is this equation wrong?" you might think.

But then space is expanding, and the criteria for inertial frames are uncertain, and simultaneity breaks down, and for some reason light is simply special — and how all of this connects and interweaves remains absolutely beyond me.

—Oh, anyone who doesn't understand those terms, please just read past this paragraph as "a jumble of words I don't recognize."

The reason the author started to feel skeptical about modern physics in the first place was this kind of argument making the rounds: "If it can't be observed, it might as well not exist — therefore it doesn't exist."

There is a world of difference between "might as well not exist" and "does not exist." Whether or not a human being has ever laid eyes on something, whether or not it's of any use to a human being — a fact is a fact. That, I feel, is what physics is supposed to be about.

The second reason I feel like picking a fight with Einstein's theory of special relativity is that it seems to me he treats light as somehow absolute — or even sacred.

And above all, the first reason is —

Because the world is more interesting if you can go faster than light.

Come on, everyone! Let's all overturn special relativity!

...And with that, space limitations mean the afterword ends here this time.

Somehow...this afterword turned out to be fairly serious.

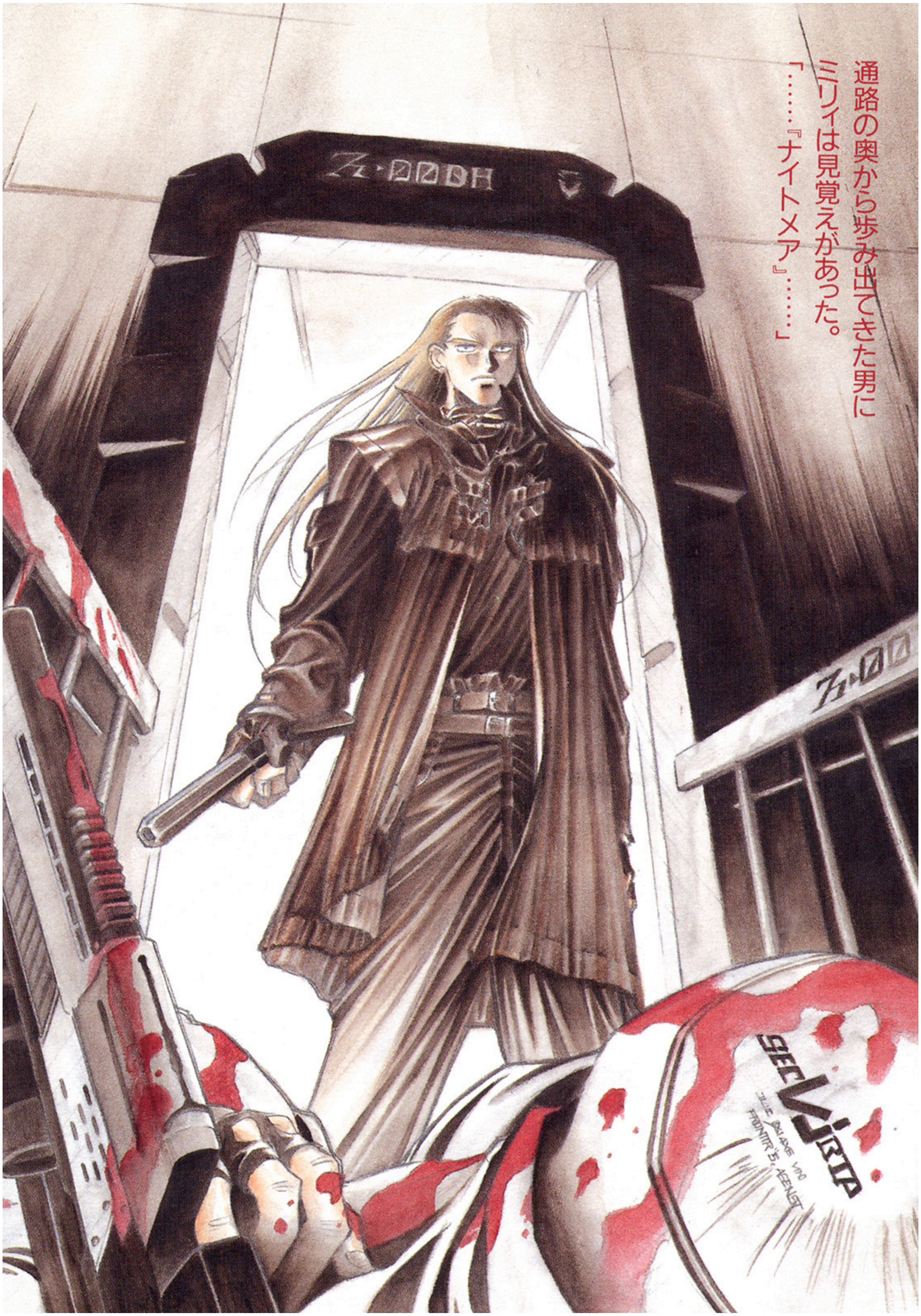
In any case — I'll see you again in Lost Universe 4!

End of Afterword

『——ハイ。ケイン?』
ディスプレイに現れたのは
『知的で美人のキャリア・ウーマン』だった——

ロスト・ユニバース③

凶夢 ざわめく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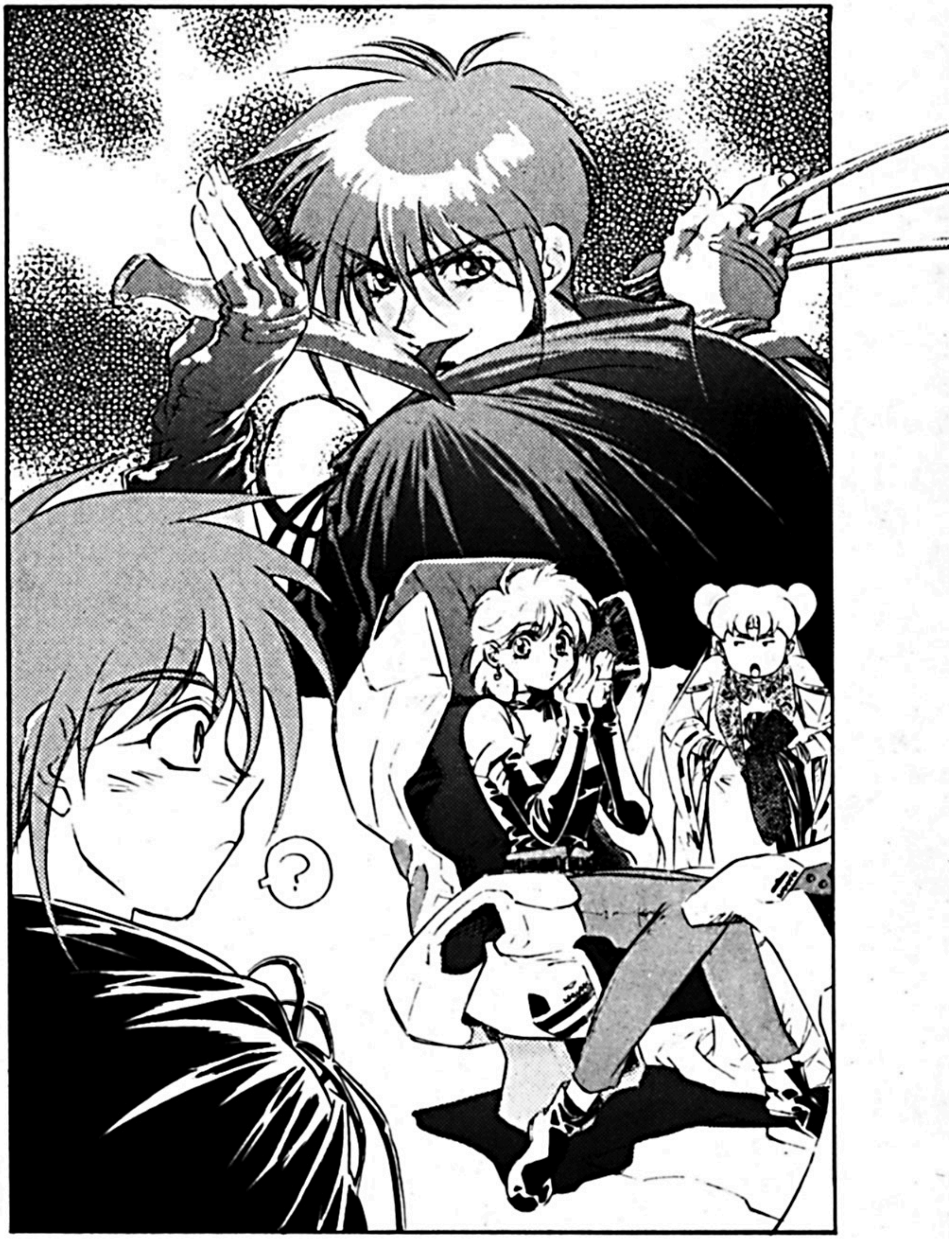
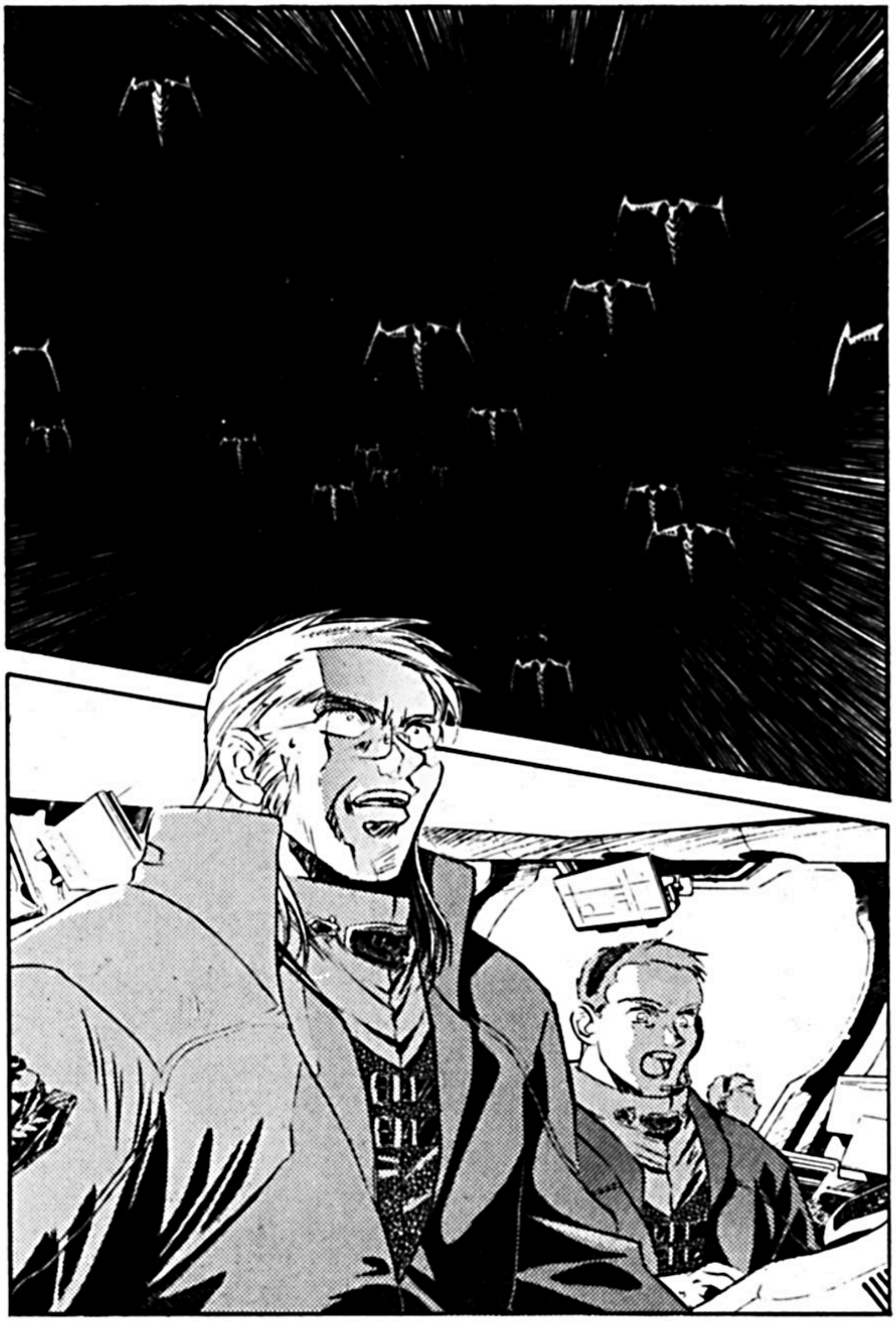
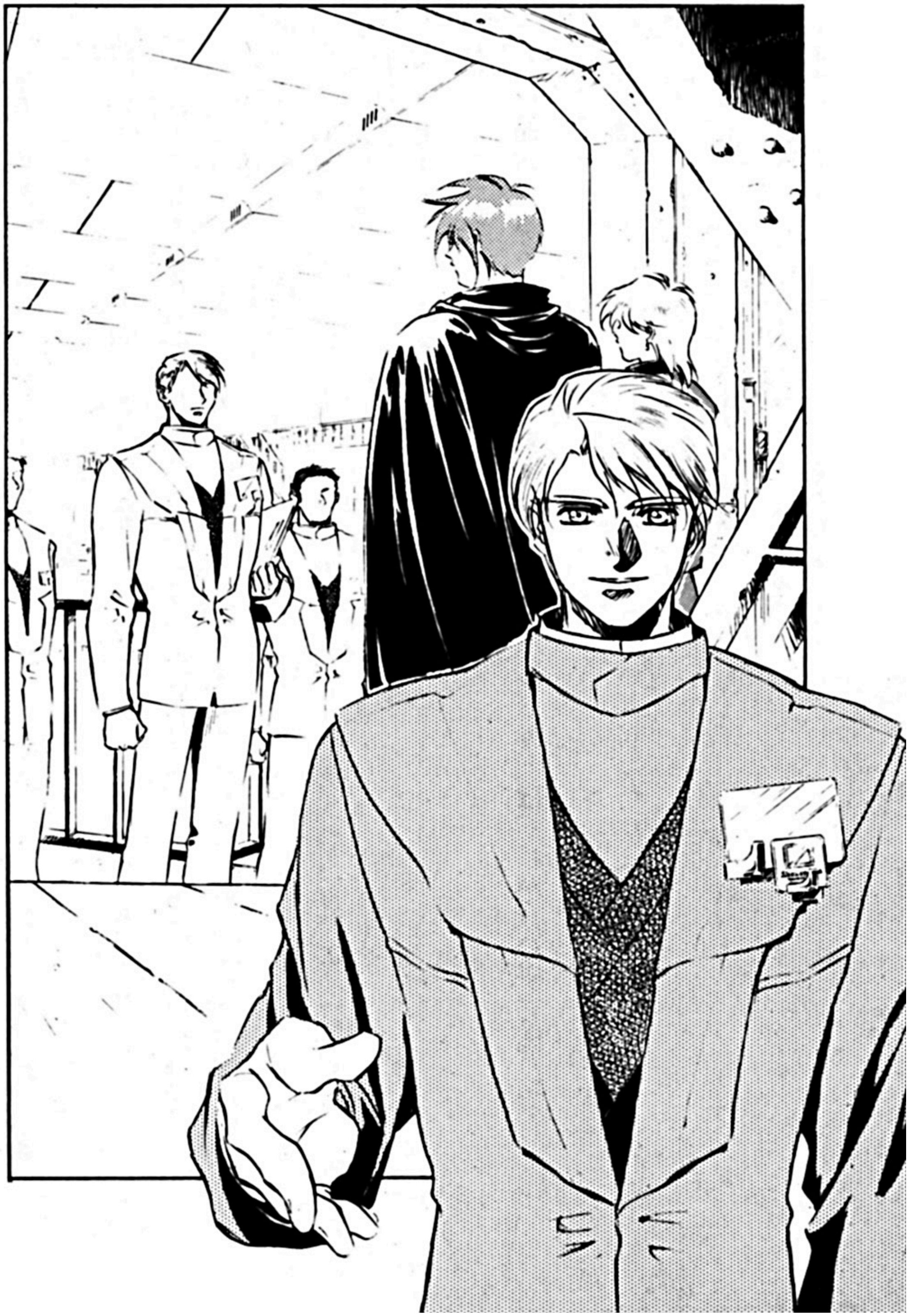
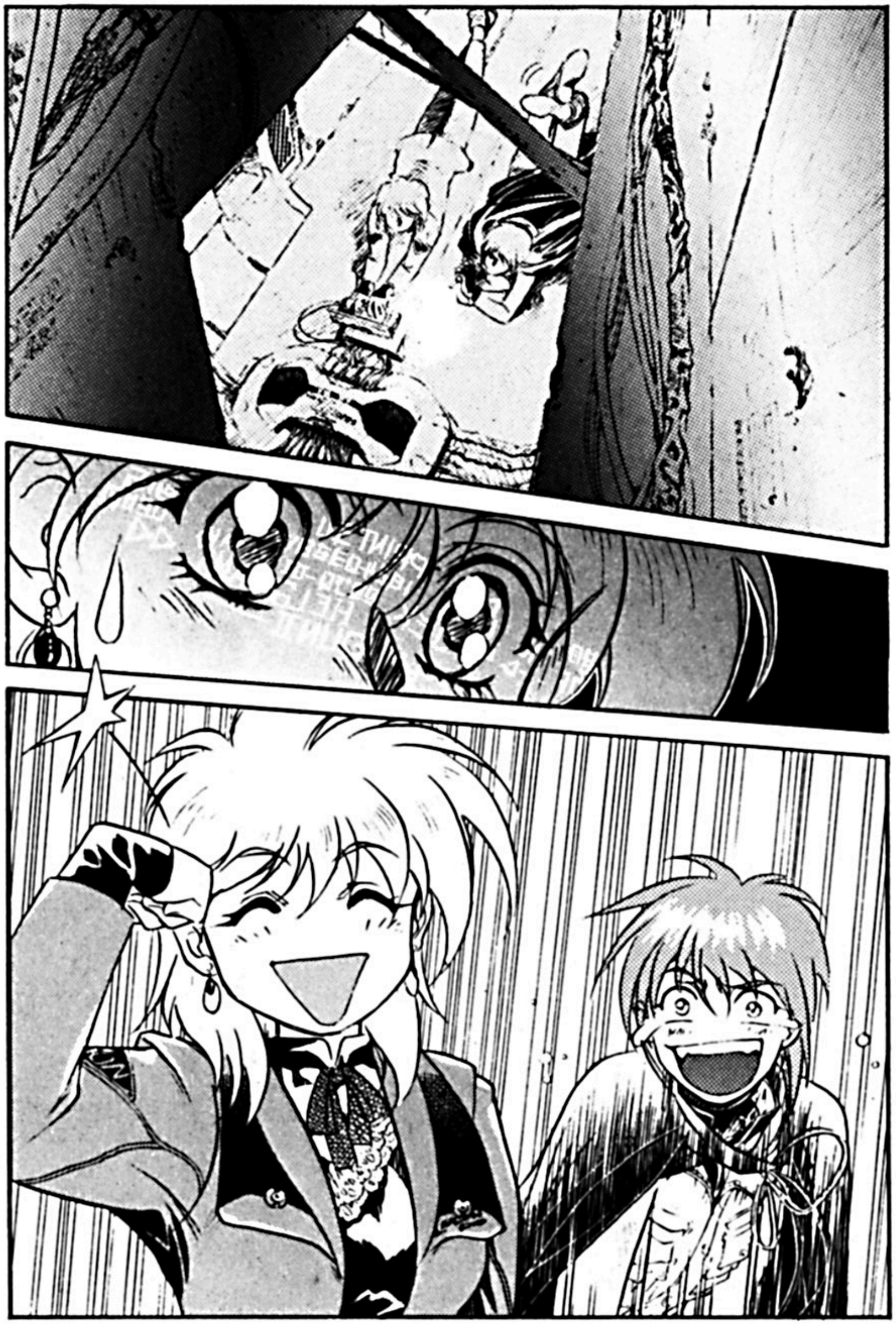
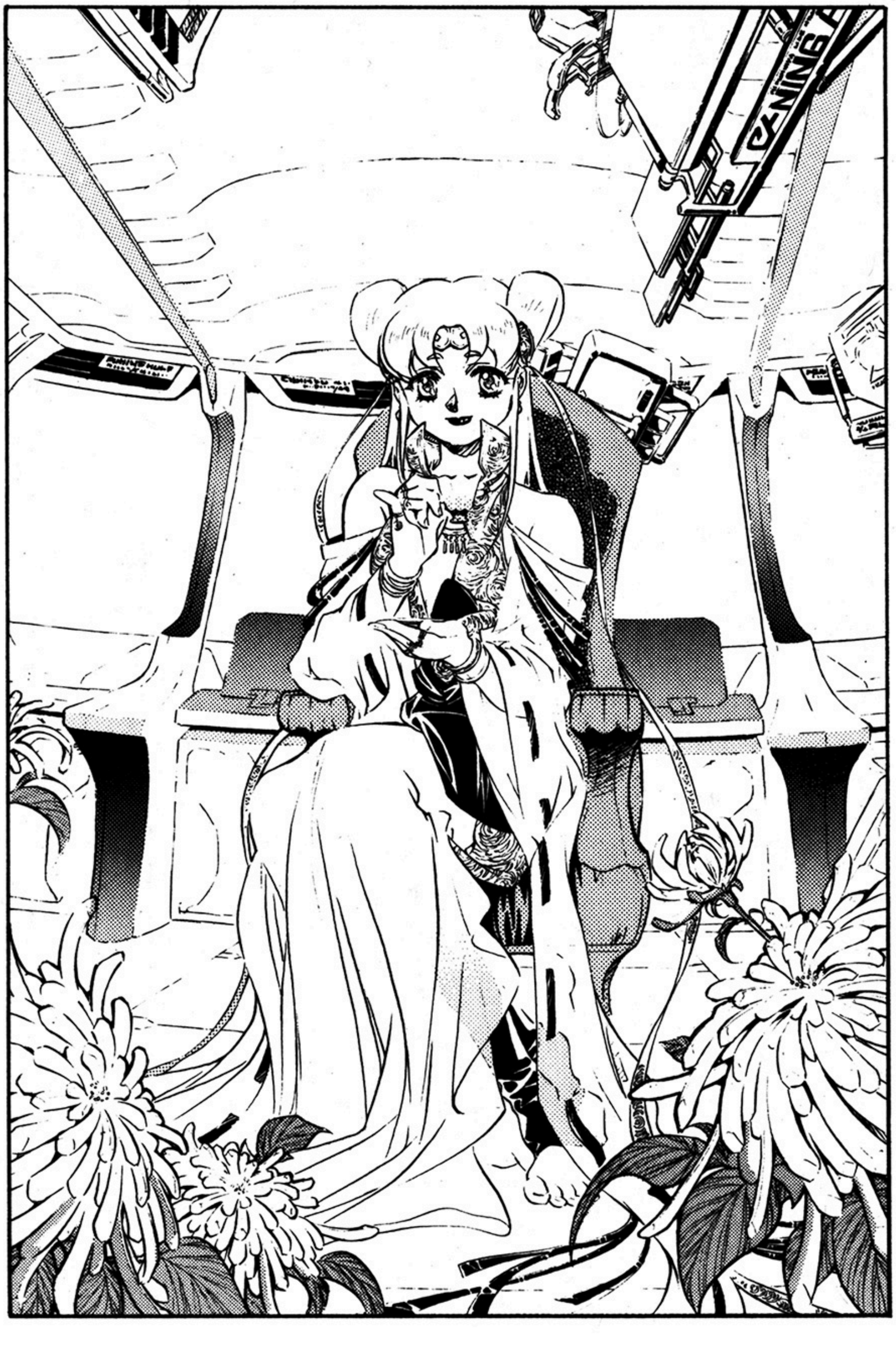
通路の奥から歩み出てきた男に
ミリィは見覚えがあった。
「……『ナイトメア』……」

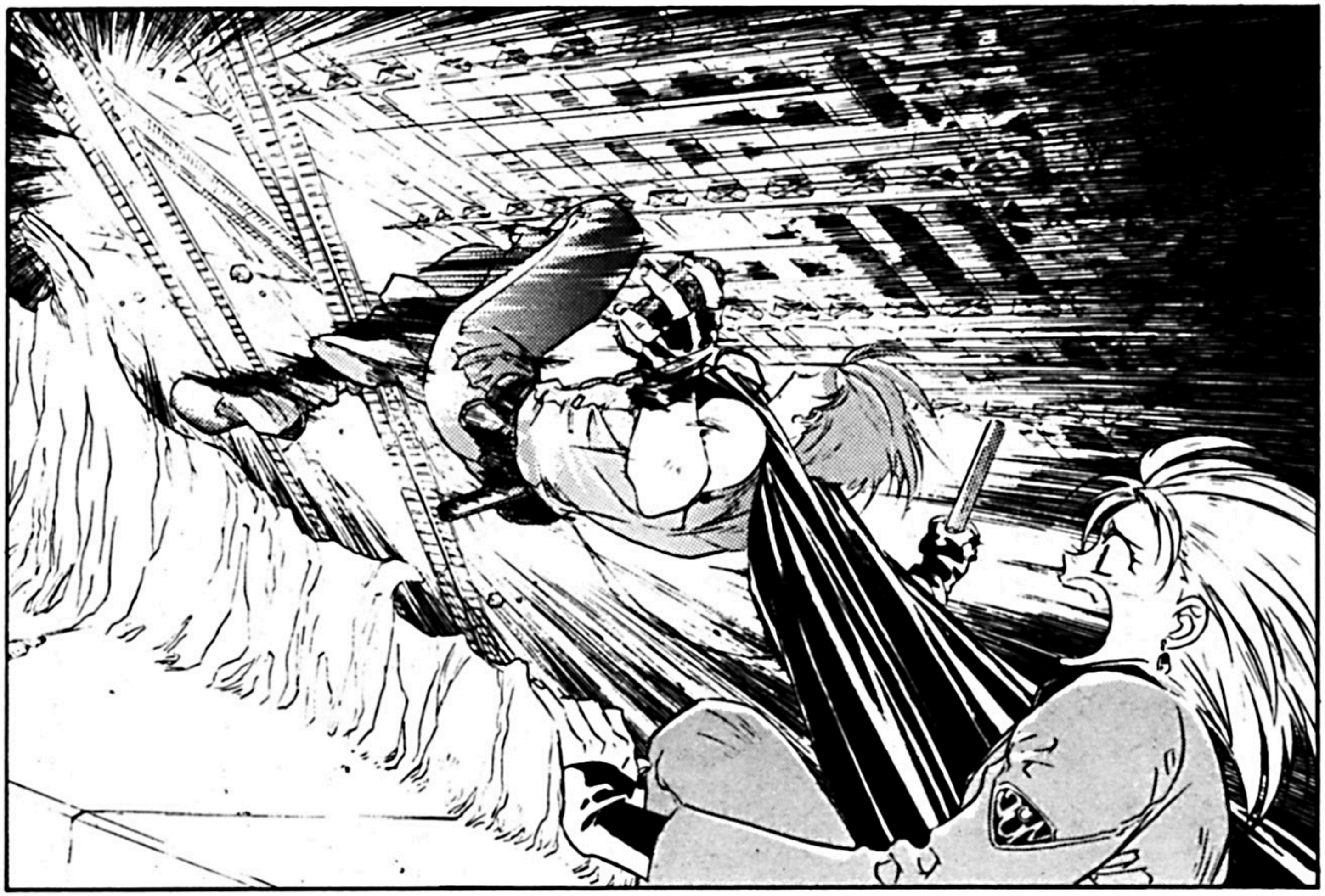


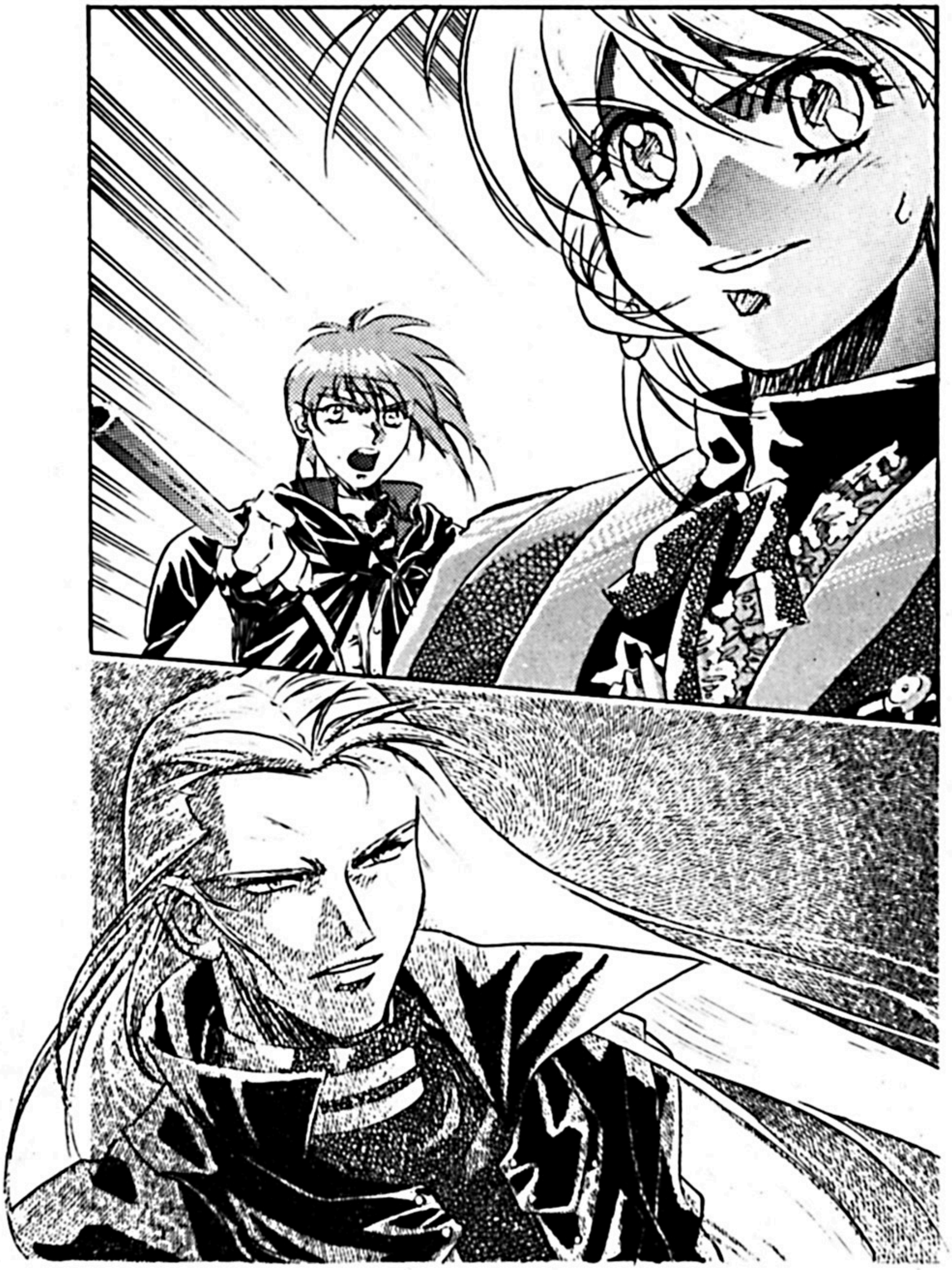


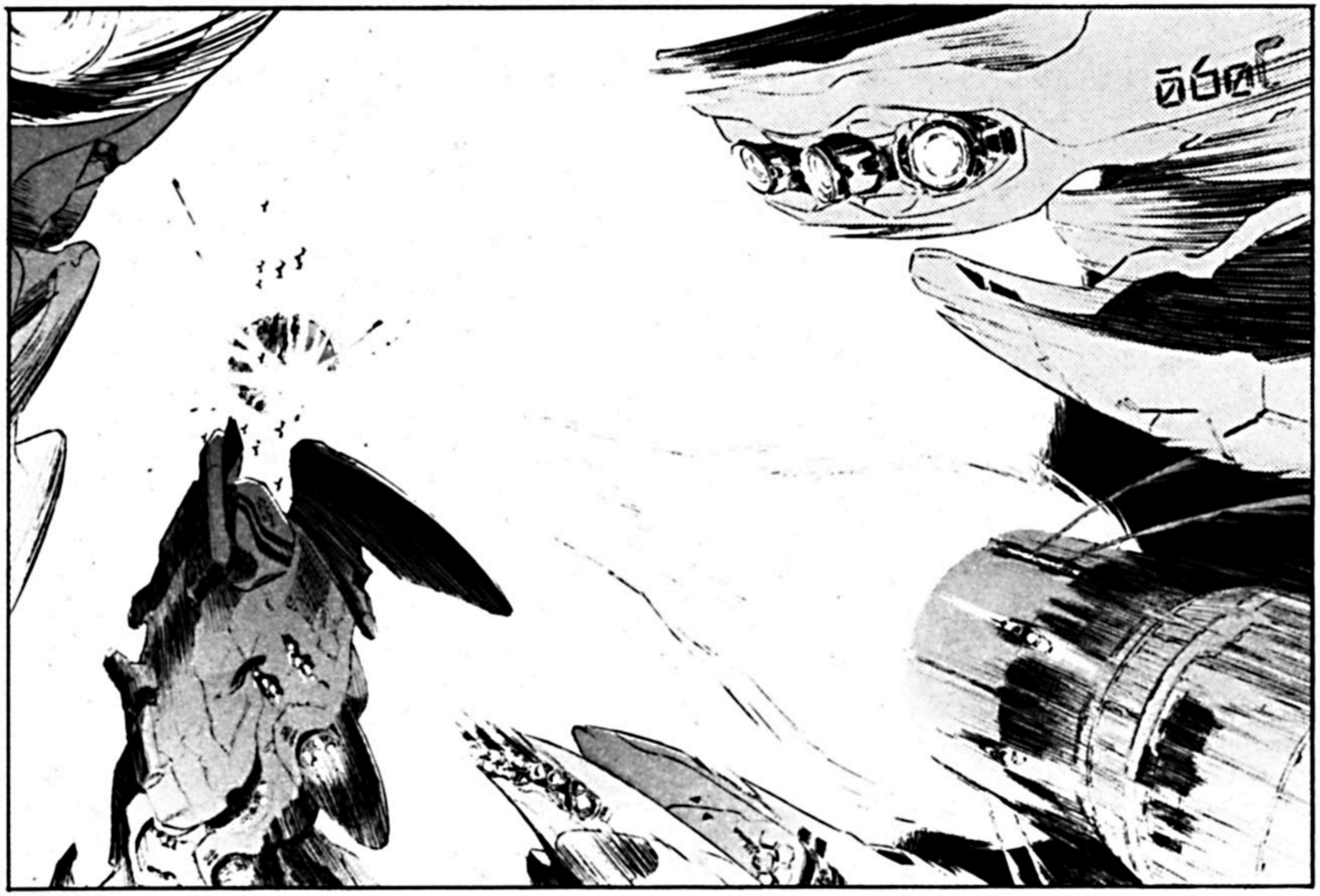








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